

To vote or not to vote: Should it be a question?

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There has been much hype, amongst the media and sections of the public, in the run up to this year's provincial and national elections in South Africa and, for some, the arrival of new parties to the electoral arena has renewed their faith in the possibility of an electoral solution to the myriad of problems facing South Africa. What was for many an unexpected announcement by the shack-dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo (ABM) that for the first time since 2006 they will be breaking with their "No Land! No House! No Vote!" campaign – and their subsequent invitation to all political parties excluding the ANC to campaign for their votes – has added to the hype. So, too, have statements by some activists that the current period represents a "shift towards radicalism" by the masses and that a large-scale vote for "parties that are standing on the platform of radical change" will help to solidify this new radicalism among the masses and lead to further struggles against ANC rule. The "Vote No" campaign for people to vote for anyone except the ANC – or otherwise to spoil their ballot – in order, as with ABM, to break the absolute majority of the ANC has also served either to renew or sustain dwindling interest in the ballot.

Politicians from across all parties have been using this hype and a seemingly renewed faith in the ballot box to their advantage. Even politically bankrupt parties like the neoliberal ANC and DA have been doing this. The DA has even secured the vote of members of ABM in KwaZulu-Natal by promising that they would not use the state against this organisation. In places such as De Doorns some farm workers that spearheaded the strikes too say they will vote for the ANC to keep the DA from governing the Western Cape – hoping that an ANC government in the Western Cape will be sympathetic to their cause and not unleash state violence against them should another strike happen. The reality though is that both the DA and ANC have been and are anti-working class parties; and in particular anti-black working class parties – one only needs look at their histories whether at national, provincial or local level and how they have used the state to violently suppress workers and the poor. Yet despite this, some activists are hoping that a vote for such parties will save them from the worst effects of state violence.

As part of the hype that has surrounded the elections this year, however, there are two parties that also claim they are fundamentally different to the ANC and DA. These two parties say they have recent struggle credentials against neoliberalism and say they will really help the poor this time around if elected into the state: the EFF and WASP. Some activists on the left, in community movements and some in workplace struggles, have been drawn to these parties and say they are going to vote for them. Some even believe that parties like WASP and the EFF will bring 'economic freedom' and even socialism. While the policies of the EFF and WASP certainly differ – WASP being more socialist and the EFF being a black nationalist party (with authoritarian leanings) that promises land and welfare for black workers and the poor – what these two parties have in common is the tactic of wanting to enter into the state to supposedly bring change. The question, therefore, is: can equality, socialism, national liberation or 'economic freedom' – or even a respite from state violence – for a majority be brought about through parties and activists entering into the state or through voting for parties that promise not to use the state for violent or oppressive means; or will this only lead to a dead-end for the working class yet again?

The state is an instrument of oppression

When looking at this question it is important to understand why states exist and what their role in society is and always has been. States arose when inequality between people in terms of class

started to emerge in society: an elite needed an instrument of coercion to maintain and entrench their rule and states were that instrument. States have, therefore, always been controlled by, and have been instruments of, a privileged minority class. Consequently, all states have always enforced the rule of a minority privileged class. As part of this states have always protected a minority ruling class's power, privilege and wealth from the majority and have enabled the exploitation and domination of the majority by a minority. To do so, all states in history have been top-down and centralised organs structured so that only a few can govern: the majority of people were and are deliberately excluded from decision-making under a state system.

As capitalism developed, the size and power of states dramatically increased. Today we have huge states that ensure the interests of the ruling class today (capitalists, politicians and top officials in the state) are protected and furthered. Through the state's executive, legislative, judicial, military and policing arms, the state always protects the interests of this class. Under capitalism, states are also central to protecting minority ownership in the form of private and state-owned property. For capitalism to function, and for class rule to be maintained, a state is therefore vital. Without a state, which claims a monopoly on violence within a given territory, an elite could not rule nor could it claim or hold onto the ownership of wealth and the means of production under capitalism. Along with this, the role of states within capitalism is to try and ensure that resistance to the exploitation and oppression of the working class is undermined, crushed or co-opted. States are, therefore, not structures that have been created to bring about liberation or equality or to end capitalism, but rather to ensure oppression, domination and the continuation of capitalism. That extends too to gunning down activists if they pose a threat to the state and the stability it tries to create at a national, provincial and local level. On this alone, the tactic of supposedly trying to use a state to end oppression, domination and capitalism is deeply flawed – states have always been central to oppression, class inequalities, domination and today capitalism, and entering into them as the EFF and WASP propose does not change this. Likewise, voting tactically for politically bankrupt parties like the DA and ANC in the hope they will lesson state violence locally will not change the nature of the state nor the purpose it is designed to carry out: oppressing, dominating and facilitating the exploitation of the working class.

The reality is that no state is truly democratic. Even in a parliamentary system, most high-ranking state officials, including generals, director-generals, police commissioners, state legal advisors, state attorneys, judges, officials in the various departments and magistrates, are never elected by the people. Most of their decisions, policies and actions will never be known by the vast majority of people – the top-down structure of the state ensures this. Linked to this, parliamentarians and the executive make and pass laws; not the mass of people. In fact, parliamentarians are in no way truly accountable to voters (except for 5 minutes every 5 years). They are not mandated nor are they recallable. They – along with permanent state bureaucrats – have power; not the people. As such, no state is participatory; but rather designed to ensure and carry out minority rule. If the EFF and WASP's representatives enter into the state, therefore, they will simply be joining the elite few that rule under a state system.

States turn liberation fighters into governors

States too generate an elite and a section of the ruling class. When people are hired or enter into top positions in the state, they gain access to the means of administration and coercion, and to new privileges, benefits and kickbacks. Being part of a few who have the power to make decisions

for and over others, and the ability to enforce those decisions, creates a privileged position. As such, the centralisation of power, which defines states, generates an elite.

The fact that under a state an elite holds decision-making power usually goes hand in hand with this elite also living under far better material conditions than workers and the unemployed. Linked to this, the bureaucracy that emerges from the centralisation that defines states also develops its own interests, like maintaining the material privileges it has and the power it has over other people. In fact, throughout history, states have been sites that have been and are used by an elite to accumulate wealth. This was so even under Lenin in the Soviet Union. An elite arose in the state in the Soviet Union and they ruled and lived privileged lives. In fact, the privileges that top positions in the state offered in the early Soviet Union attracted opportunists that wanted to gain wealth. To maintain their privileged positions these officials in the state ruthlessly exploited and oppressed workers. Indeed, the good lives that top state officials and politicians live in all countries was and is always based on the exploitation of workers and the unemployed. This has been done through exploitation in state owned companies and/or through taxing the working class.

The anarchist Bakunin foresaw the possibility of such a situation arising in cases where supposedly implementing socialism or bringing about national liberation was based on capturing state power. Bakunin said that the “statist path” was “entirely ruinous for the great masses of the people” because it did not abolish class power but simply changed the make-up and faces of the ruling class. Consequently, he stated that if the socialist struggle or a struggle for national liberation was carried out with “ambitious intent to set up a powerful state”, or if “it is carried out without the people and must therefore depend for success on a privileged class” it would become a “retrogressive, disastrous, counter-revolutionary movement” 1. He also noted that when former liberation fighters or activists enter into the state, because of its top-down structure, they come to no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people. This has not been due to any faults in the personal characters of such activists entering into the state, but rather due to the logic of the state – which exists for a few to govern. The past, therefore, tells us that even if a party like WASP (which is far more principled than the EFF) enters into the state, in all likelihood their character would alter, they would become rulers and governors; and the working class would remain in a subordinate position.

Although WASP say that they want to enter into the state in order to expose it, they fail to acknowledge some basic truths, confirmed by history on every occasion that socialist parties have entered into the state in order to change or “expose” it: unless they win a large majority in parliament, which is very unlikely at this point, they will simply not be given the talk-time required to argue their positions and “expose” the state. In order not to be ridiculed and sidelined by their capitalist and nationalist colleagues in parliament, and to be listened to at all, they will increasingly have to water down their radical/socialist rhetoric until the point that they will become hardly distinguishable from the other parliamentarians they entered into parliament to expose in the first place. And, even if they won a majority of seats in parliament, this does not change the fundamental nature of the state as an instrument of oppression that turns liberation fighters into governors. On entering into the state, rather than activists changing the state, the state changes them.

Will the state nationalising bring freedom?

The fact that the state cannot bring freedom, equality and socialism can also be seen around the issue of nationalisation. Both the EFF and WASP propose to nationalise some companies and some sectors of the economy. But this will not bring about socialism, national liberation or 'economic freedom' for the working class. The state nationalising companies does not break with capitalism or the class system on which it rests. A state nationalising companies simply means the state takes ownership of these companies, the state then appoints the managers (who get huge salaries) and they grow rich out of this. This is state capitalism, and is certainly not socialism. Under nationalisation, the working class still does not own anything; the state does. Workers still have bosses, except under nationalisation the bosses are well paid state managers, and workers are still exploited and oppressed.

WASP tries to address some of this by claiming that if they get into state power they will nationalise companies, but allow for worker control. This policy too has been a historical failure. No state has ever nationalised companies and then allowed workers to genuinely control them. The top-down, centralised, and controlling logic of the state has always clashed with genuine workers' control and democracy. During the Russian Revolution in 1917 workers took over factories and started to run them democratically through workers' committees. They wanted to link their committees into a federation using direct democracy in order to collectively plan the economy from below. The Bolsheviks in the state, however, nationalised these companies – and with this a conflict between genuine worker control and the state began. Over time and as the Soviet state strengthened it began to crush the initiatives of the workers and their democracy. This happened because state officials realised worker democracy was a threat to their power. As part of this, the realisation struck home that if workers had power there would be no need for a state and the well-paid officials that ran it.

As such, it was in 1918 that Lenin ended worker self-management within Russia through decreeing the implementation of one-man management. This saw the Soviet state appoint these new managers, often from the ranks of the old elite, and forcefully end democracy in the workplace – often at the point of a gun. The reality that the Soviet state had nationalised the factories, which had originally been seized by workers from the capitalists, contributed to this – it gave the state immense power which it then wielded against the workers. In fact, the state accepted no independent initiative from workers in factories even before and perhaps more importantly after the civil war had ended and state rule proved itself incompatible with genuine workers' control. As workers were not, and could never be the state (due to its oppressive and hierarchical nature it was designed for a minority to rule over a majority), state ownership never translated into the socialisation of property and wealth, it never led to an end to capitalism, and it smothered workers' control. As such, nationalisation also never broke the relations of production that define capitalism; it rather re-instituted it and entrenched it. Therefore, the very logic of all states has proven to be centralist, authoritarian and elitist. This means states are incompatible with genuine grassroots democracy, self-management and participation.

The state, therefore, can't be used as an instrument to bring about 'economic freedom', socialism or national liberation – history has shown this. So should WASP or the EFF get into state power, their representatives would be rulers; not the working class. They too would, if history is to go by, begin to govern in their own interests; not those of the working class. In fact, by entering into the state they would become an elite and they would, to maintain their positions,

have to dominate the working class. This is especially a danger with regards to the EFF – which is headed by an aspirant black elite that deliberately downplays class differences amongst the black population. Indeed, the EFF openly says that black professionals entering into the state should be very well remunerated, which by definition can only be done by exploiting workers.

Differently though to the EFF, WASP says that their activists entering the state would receive no more than the average salary of a skilled worker – although they are not clear on how they define this – but limiting the salary a MP takes home doesn't change the fact that the state itself is an instrument of oppression and elite minority rule, and an exploiter of labour through state ownership of companies. That means that even if WASP parliamentarians take home limited salaries they will still be dependent on the exploitation of workers for these salaries.

Therefore, the state path that the EFF and WASP are embarking on will not bring freedom to the working class, and specifically the black working class. States only exist because a privileged minority exists – and by entering into the state, the top representatives from the EFF and WASP will become part of that privileged elite.

Likewise having the DA or ANC in provincial governments or having the majority that these parties hold in any specific legislature lessened, in the hope that this will create a more sympathetic environment to struggles, is also a dead-end – the state no matter which party has a majority in its parliamentary sections exists to blunt, end, and co-opt struggle; and not to turn a blind eye to it or to be sympathetic to it.

The state enables corruption and its role is repressive

Indeed, ABMs position around elections holds many dangers for activists. Differently to many left and community and workplace activists Abahlali baseMjondolo – previously considered by many a bastion of mass anti-electoral politics in South Africa – have, rather than calling for a vote for the EFF or WASP on a platform of radical change, said that in KwaZulu-Natal they will vote for the DA in order to break the absolute majority of the ANC and to get rid of corruption, injustice and repression. Abahlali have been explicit that this is a strategic decision to bring their members some alleviation from the brutal repression they have suffered at the hands of the ANC, that their members are not taking membership in the DA and that as a movement they will maintain complete autonomy from the DA, but the question still arises: if voted into power, either nationally or in KwaZulu-Natal, would the DA be willing and able to curb corruption, fight injustice and put an end to violent repression? That is, would the DA in power be substantially different to the ANC in power, if at all? Its practice in the Western Cape suggests not.

Corruption is not unique to the ANC and occurs, to a greater or lesser extent, in every state around the world. This is because the top-down, centralised and bureaucratic nature and structure of states lends itself to this sort of behaviour. Because the state was formed to ensure minority rule over the majority, because it is used to accumulate and defend wealth and power by that minority, and because that controlling elite minority is not accountable to the majority in any real way, it follows that this elite will exploit this position in its own interests and bend and, where necessary, break the laws – which it sets and enforces – in order to further its interests and increase its power, wealth and privilege.

Swapping people or parties in power does not change the basic fact that the power and privilege afforded to anyone who enters into the state, and thus develops new interests as they become part of a privileged ruling elite, have a corrupting affect on them. People become corrupted in

the state because they make decisions on a daily basis without consulting the people that the decisions they make affect and, because they are unaccountable to the people they represent, there is nothing to stop them from making decisions that benefit themselves and their class. Moreover, if the very nature of the state has a corrupting affect on those who enter into it – assuming their intentions were good to begin with – it should follow that any safeguard to such corruption should come from outside the state. By entering into electoral politics one is in fact endorsing the institutions that create the conditions for corruption in the first place.

In the Western Cape the DA has consistently promoted policies that benefit the ruling class and, consequently, has consistently had to suppress and repress working class responses and resistance to this. The level of violence used doesn't detract from the fact that repression is a basic and inherent function of any state regardless of who controls it. Because the role of the state is to promote and defend the interests of an elite ruling minority and private ownership of property – and considering that the state itself generates a part of this ruling elite and also claims a monopoly on violence in a given territory – it follows that any state will resort to coercion and violence to defend the interests of the ruling elite when the parliamentary ruse fails; including the violent repression of working class initiatives. This is no different with the Metro Police in Cape Town and there is no reason to believe it would be any different in KwaZulu-Natal; it is a logical consequence of the nature of the state as a top-down and centralised organ of minority rule.

If the DA hasn't killed people for protesting yet it is only because they have not yet had to, owing to other methods of social warfare and containment – such as containment camps like Blikkiesdorp – and because, as an opposition party that is not in control of the state at a national level, they would not get away with it with the impunity that the ANC does. This is both because the ANC itself would use its control of the state apparatus – the police, courts, prisons etc. – to weaken its opposition and because the DA wants to present itself as an alternative to the violent rule of the ANC.

There are plenty of examples of police violence under the DA, as seen in Delft and during the farmworkers' strike, for example, as well as of allegations of corruption, for example around housing developments in Khayelitsha and Mandela Park, and there's no good reason to believe, were the DA to rule KwaZulu-Natal or be in full control of the state at national level, that it would be any less violent or corrupt in defending its power with impunity. DA politicians in the Western Cape are part of a privileged ruling elite and extending the DA's rule to KwaZulu-Natal would simply mean that top DA representatives in KwaZulu-Natal would become more privileged, wealthy and powerful at the expense of the people who voted for them.

The fact that the DA has signed a legally binding agreement with Abahlali does not change this; the ANC government also has a legally binding agreement with the people to provide housing in the form of the Constitution! The point is that the elite that controls the state also controls the application of law and uses this in pursuit of its own class interests.

While it is understandable that Abahlali members are desperate for an alternative to the violently corrupt rule of the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal, and that they might therefore have decided to vote for the lesser of two evils in order to get some respite, they are sorely mistaken if they think that by voting for it they “are giving the DA a chance to govern so that they can make a difference”. The DA, as Abahlali themselves have noted, are a wholly capitalist party with a history of anti-poor policies and behaviour and in all likelihood, were the DA to gain control

of national government or any new provinces, they would become as repressive as the ANC as soon as they were able to consolidate their power.

One can only hope that the illusion in electoral politics and the possibility of a solution from above, through the state, will be short-lived and that, in the meantime, Abahlali will not abandon its work of popular grassroots organisation and mobilisation.

The dead-end of elections

For parties that claim to have struggle credentials and working class interests at heart the act of entering into parliamentary politics is also disingenuous from the point of view of wanting to change society: rather than encouraging the working class self-organisation and self-confidence necessary to change society it reinforces illusions in parliament and the idea that change can only come from above, through the state. Moreover, millions of rands and many other resources that could have been invested in movement-building and supporting community and workplace struggles are diverted into election campaigning, registering for elections etc. and popular struggles are turned into a platform for electioneering. This reinforces the idea that change can only come from above, and that voting is more important than the day-to-day struggles of the working class.

The main argument behind Abahlali's decision to vote DA and the "Vote No" campaign is that an alternative to the stranglehold of the ANC majority needs to be built, and that this can be done by outvoting the ANC at the polls; be it by voting for one of the newcomers or any other party besides the ANC. However, both contesting elections – as the EFF and WASP propose – and calling or campaigning for people to vote – be it for a party on a radical platform, with illusions of social change, or for any party bar the ANC just to break the majority of the latter – are, from the point of view of radical social transformation, disingenuous and counterproductive.

What needs to be broken is not just the stranglehold of the ANC, as desirable as that may be, but the post-apartheid idea that meaningful political engagement and radical social change are only to be found in parliamentary politics and that transformation must necessarily come from above, through the state. Indeed, the possibility of achieving any kind of social transformation in favour of the working class and poor depends on a decisive break with this tradition.

Contrary to claims that a massive vote for the parties that say they represent radical change would entrench radicalism and lead to further struggle, or that the DA would make a difference if in power, the only thing a vote for any of the parties is sure to do is prolong illusions in the bourgeois parliamentary system and the near religious belief that socialism, national liberation or 'economic freedom' must, necessarily, come through the state.

In fact, not only is voting for representatives of parties to go into the state a dead-end for the working class; but it is a positive danger. It fuzzes the fact that the state is an enemy of the working class. It also creates illusions that the state can be used for liberatory purposes. As such, it creates the potential to generate false hopes in the state and fosters the belief that a higher power, other than the working class itself, is needed to bring freedom. It, therefore, promotes the subordination of the working class to higher power and elite party representatives, which weakens independent action by workers and the unemployed and historically has undermined the militancy of the struggles of the working class.

A real alternative: outside and against the state

Instead of voting, the working class needs to struggle for change outside and against the state. This includes ensuring the political independence of struggles to ensure they are not co-opted by aspirant parliamentarians and politicians. As part of this, the working class needs to strengthen its movements and transform them into organs of working class direct democracy based on assemblies and mandated rotating and recallable delegates. Through this and through direct action, these organisations can be transformed into revolutionary instruments to fight capitalism, the state and all forms of oppression and domination – in particular in South Africa that also means fighting racial oppression and sexism. History has shown that such revolutionary organisations and structures can be built – one only needs to look at Russia during 1917, Spain in 1936 and South Africa in the early 1980s to see this is possible.

In fact we have seen massive protests in recent years too in communities and on the mines in South Africa. These need to be built on and the organisations and structures involved need to be strengthened and radically democratised so that they can become a counter-power that can challenge bosses and politicians. To do so also means that a revolutionary vision that aims to end all forms of oppression, domination and exploitation will have to be fostered and nurtured in the movements, organisations and structures that are emerging and that have been involved in these recent struggles.

Certainly, the working class has to fight for the things that are needed today to improve their lives, which includes placing demands on bosses and politicians because they have stolen from the working class. Indeed, things like corruption, repression and poor delivery can only be resolved in favour of the working class by the working class organising itself outside and against the state and placing demands on and even imposing its will on the bosses and state through mass direct action, not by voting. Through this and the school of struggle, the working class can build its organisations into a massive counter-power that can eventually smash capitalism and the state; and throw out the capitalists and politicians from power. So winning immediate gains is vital for building towards a revolution. Voting, however, does not bring the working class closer to this; but organising and struggle on the streets, in the mines, schools, farms, on the land and factory floor does.

As part of this, the working class also needs to build towards the goal of taking the land, mines, banks, farms, and in fact everything into its own hands. This can be done one day by the working class itself seizing them directly – and not through hoping that politicians will give them over to the working class (they won't, they will keep them for themselves and their elite class; and as such they will have to be fought if the working class is to gain the means of production). The working class, therefore, needs to build democratic revolutionary organs and fight so that one day it can take power in society and run it through direct democracy without a state – using our movements and organs of direct democracy like worker councils, community assemblies and committees to allow everyone to have an equal say in how society is run. Voting brings us no closer to this either. Rather all it does is create more illusions in the state and politicians like Malema, and in the process it keeps the working class enslaved. If we are serious about the liberation of the working class, therefore, voting in state elections is not the answer; rather struggle and building the independent power of the working class is.

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