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Broken world, broken people – we need a path to a better future

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We are living in a world that for most people is broken and that has broken most people. It is not a god given world, but one that has been constructed by those in power and that has left most people mired in deprivation.

Under COVID-19, this world has sunk to new lows. While hundreds of millions of people have become unemployed – and in South Africa the unemployment rate has now surpassed 42% – corporations have once again received trillions in bailouts from states to keep capitalism barely afloat. Indeed, we face the greatest capitalist crisis since the Great Depression, political turmoil is rife, reactionary ideas continue to abound, and little hope of a better future seems to exist.

Yet, even before COVID-19, the world was and has been a broken place. In this world, the vast majority of people are ruled over by an elite through states. They are exploited as workers or are unemployed under capitalism. People of colour face racial oppression and women are subjugated by patriarchy.

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While 26 billionaires control more wealth than the bottom 3.8 billion people, most people live in poverty, battle to feed themselves, and either have no income or very little in the form of wages. On top of this we face a possible existential crisis in the form of climate change.

In South Africa, the problems we face are immense. We are the most unequal country among those that keep records. The working class, both Black and even section of the white working class, remain stuck in a cycle of poverty. Racism is a constant for the Black working class and is something experienced daily for which escape is impossible without wealth. Working class women too face the daily grind of doing unpaid labour and the threat of violence from men at work, in their own communities, and even in their own homes.

Beyond the material, the world that has been constructed has also left people psychologically damaged. It leads us to hold warped values, feelings of insecurity, a mistrust of others, the dehumanisation of others, and twisted ideas of where and how happiness can be found.

Under capitalism in the 21st century, we are indoctrinated to believe that happiness can be found in consumerism (which could ultimately destroy large parts of the ecology) and within the confines of our own egos. If we buy the next fad we are told it will bring us joy and fulfilment. The entire advertising industry is based on the bullshit that your value as a person is based on what you can afford to buy. Human value is reduced to the objects we own – those that own beautiful or desirable objects are seen as being successful and those that don't are seen as inadequate. For the vast majority of humanity this is massively psychologically damaging.

The system we live in also fosters vicious competition for jobs and survival among the working class. Feelings such as compassion often have to take a back seat. At work, we are subjected to the dictatorship of managers and owners damaging any sense of self-worth – being told what to do, how to do

it, and when to do it, day in and day out, leaves people feeling worthless and powerless.

Competition also exists among the ruling class. They fight tooth and nail among themselves to exploit human beings that have to sell their labour to survive. They fight to extract wealth from the ecology and they fight to take over each other's businesses. The most sordid human emotions such as greed, self-obsession, ruthlessness, coldness and selfishness are valued under this. It is no accident, therefore, that it has been estimated that one in five Chief Executive Officers in top corporations are psychopaths – the traits of psychopaths are valued and rewarded within the system.

When most people face the inevitable drudgery of daily poverty caused by capitalism, they are led to believe ideologically that this misery is due to an individual failing or a flaw in character – the fact that wealth, through mechanism of exploitation and property relations, funnels up the class system is forgotten. Indeed, we are endlessly indoctrinated to worship individualism to the point that some oppressors, such as the late Margaret Thatcher, even claim/ed society is a myth. This has devastating consequences leading to alienation and self-loathing for not individually attaining the constructed notion of “success” (read wealth).

Under such conditions, rage and anger have become rife, loneliness has become endemic, poorer communities are breaking down under social pressure, self-loathing is widespread, violence is rife, and depression and anxiety have become common place with at least 30% of people suffering at some point in their lives from anxiety. While the oppressed and exploited suffer the most from the psychological damage wrought by a warped system, the oppressors and the wealthy also have not escaped damage. We are social animals and for the vast majority of our 200,000 to 300,000 years of existence care, community and mutual aid were important – it is how we survived as

a species. Ripping that asunder and seeing such emotions and actions as weak damages everyone's psyches.

Compounding this, there has been a massive attempt by the ruling class in every state to sell the idea that there are no alternatives to the quagmire we are being forced to live in. In other words, they sell hopelessness. The reason they do this is to try and ensure working class people feel despair and accept the situation. Compounding this sense of hopelessness are past failures that initially attempted to create a better world – for example the Soviet Union. The parties of social democracy – including the African National Congress (ANC) – too abandoned their vision of a welfare form of capitalism that they used to try and inspire people with. Instead the leadership adopted neoliberalism in a mad rush to become wealthy and join the ruling class.

In anger and rage, many people worldwide have been turning to the worst beliefs and actions possible. The hatred of women has escalated. Populist and even fascist parties have experienced a surge in popularity because they are able to tap into the anger. As part of this, dangerous scapegoating by populists has become rife with the “other” (whose members are also mostly working class) being blamed for the misery caused by capitalism and nation states. In fact, we see this in South Africa where hatred of the “other” in terms of race is rising. Ironically, these dangerous movements also, however, give people some sense of belonging through ultra-nationalism in a world where any sense of community has been under attack – the real problem is that it is a sense of belonging based on loathing.

It is no accident, therefore, that right-wing white nationalism in South Africa is gaining ground among working class and middle class whites (many of whom have a long history of holding racist beliefs due to indoctrination) under the guise of “movements” such as AfriForum. It is also no accident a small section of the Black working class have bought into the

– but to do so requires a vision, progressive ideas, and spaces of collective healing and creating a conscious and caring cadre.

rhetoric of the leaders of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) who use the hatred of white and Indian people in South Africa, without any reference to their class or beliefs of actual individuals, to further their own political ambitions and to try and attain wealth through rising up the state. Thus, scapegoating taps into the anger that now is rife and hating the “other” gives a sense of belonging, albeit a warped one.

All is not lost though. There has historically been a section within the progressive movement – in different parts of the world and in South Africa – based around forms of radically democratic socialism that has not only tapped into the righteous anger of the working class, but has also sought to create a home and sense of belonging for people based on progressive values and principles such as mutual aid, solidarity and even love. This section of the progressive movement in the past provided the working class with a sense of having its own community, a sense of belonging to something bigger, and a sense of it as a class could itself create a better future based on direct democracy and socialism. In the past this defined such movements as the Industrial Workers of the World in the United States and the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOS-ATU) in South Africa.

If we want a better world, we need to revive the popularity of the types of politics, ethics, values, principles and practices that formed the essence – at their best – of such movements and update it for the context of the 21st century. We have to give people that are rightfully angry a home, but one that is healing and progressive and that not only aims for real democracy, mutual aid, belonging, respect, dignity, tolerance, humility and egalitarianism in the future, but as everyday practice. If we don’t, more and more people will be lost to various forms of populism and, more worrying, ultra-nationalism that are arising.

The task of rebuilding this form of politics into a popular force among a majority of people will not be an easy one. It

will require a radical departure from the hierarchical ways of organising that have become hegemonic and that define nation states, political parties, capitalism and even the dominant trade unions. This is difficult as we are products of the oppressive systems we live under and are damaged to such an extent that even in some “left” circles it is often the person that dominates, is forceful, competitive, and ruthless that rises to the top.

While we do need to draw people into a radically democratic and socialist-orientated movement based on their self-organising that is initially driven by their anger, we also need practices that can provide a sense of belonging and healing so that such a movement can become transformative in the widest sense. This is vital if we truly want a better world. We need progressive spaces that we can use to begin to collectively heal the damages that have been done by capitalism, nation states, patriarchy and racism. We need to use this to transform anger into hope.

To be such a transformative movement we need to practice humility, critical self-reflection, care, compassion and love. We need to practice a radical democracy where people are not afraid to speak, no matter what they might say and who they might be, and where people collectively change for the better. We need to create spaces that truly value difference and democracy and that are based on debate, trust, loyalty, accountability and respect. We also need a joyous and hopeful vision based on egalitarianism, tolerance and love, to counter the vision of hate that populism and ultra-nationalism offer. In other words, we need to create a home for the diverse working class.

To build organisations that provide a sense of belonging and community and that are caring we need to begin to build initially at the street level and on the shop floor. We need to offer people spaces at a very local level in which they can together address local issues via structures like street assemblies and issues within workplaces via worker forums or committees.

These need to be caring spaces, based on close relationships centred around mutual aid, through which people can win local gains. In South Africa’s liberation struggle in the 1980s, such structures, in the form of street committees, existed to a degree (they were dismantled by the ANC when it achieved state power in 1994). As such, it is not impossible to build them.

These street assemblies could then be confederated at a neighbourhood level, a city wide level, a provincial/state level and even a national or international level through mandated delegates as opposed to representatives. Likewise, worker forums could also be confederated by mandated delegates either by fundamentally changing unions or building new confederated structures. Such structures were built in different places and times very successfully: one need only think of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) in Spain in the 1930s.

This may seem like some utopian dream. It is not. In the Kurdish areas of Syria, known popularly as Rojava, a movement and an experiment to create a society that is egalitarian and based on direct democracy (that is not a nation state) and that overcomes capitalism, patriarchy, racism and tribalism is being built. At a street level between 80 and 100 households form a commune to run the economy, education, furthering women’s liberation, and carry out basic governance locally via direct democracy. Through mandated delegates, these are confederated into neighbourhood assemblies, city councils and canton councils. Indeed, the movement they created and the society they are trying to build is based on tolerance, critical self-reflection, diversity, accountability and mutual aid. If this can be done in the midst of a civil war, something similar can be done elsewhere. Indeed, in South Africa, Brazil, Argentina and elsewhere we already have community movements and worker formations that offer some hope, but we need to build these into a truly transformative mass movement, and we can