

# Democratic Confederatism and Movement Building in South Africa

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## **Introduction**

The ongoing capitalist crisis, and the impacts of COVID19, have made it clear that the capitalist and state system we live under is neither efficient nor just. Inequality has hit record levels and a small elite has more wealth than ever, while the very basics – such as a decent healthcare, water, housing, sanitation, food and electricity – cannot be effectively financed, run nor delivered. Because of the profit motive of capitalism there was no real preparation for a health crisis such as COVID19 – it is not profitable for capital to prepare for long term threats – even though scientists warned as early as 2006 that the possibility of some form of viral pandemic was likely at some point due to the destruction by corporations of natural barriers, like rain forests. Politicians in every state abuse their power too and corruption is rife, only its severity varies. We see this even when there is a pandemic – some local politicians have even sold food parcels meant to alleviate people's hunger during the COVID 19 lockdown.

Parliamentary democracy is largely hollow with a majority of people having no real political power. The oppression of women and people of colour continues unabated and imperialism deepens everyday. Due to the ever-expanding nature of capitalism the ecology is on the verge of collapse. It is clear a movement for change and an alternative to capitalism and the state system is needed.

One alternative that is proving to be viable in large parts of the Kurdish majority areas of the Middle East is Democratic Confederalism. In South Africa there is much we can learn, adopt and adapt from Democratic Confederalism for local movement building.

## **What is Democratic Confederalism?**

Democratic Confederalism is a revolutionary ideology, practice and way of organising that has arisen in the Kurdish Freedom Movement in parts of Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Democratic Confederalism is a form of socialism that looks to eventually replace the state and capitalism with a radical democratic form of People's Power. It involves people organising themselves into communes, councils and committees to democratically run every aspect of their lives – including education, safety, politics, healthcare, housing and food – and to create a communal economy based on co-operatives that are democratically controlled through street communes and confederated councils of mandated delegates.

This is not only a vision that activists aim for in the future after a revolution, but is a way of organising today. The aim is to expand People's Power into a dual power, while diminishing the power of the state and capitalism, and to eventually replace these through a social revolutionary process with the communes and councils' people have already created.

Democratic Confederalism argues that self-defence is a right of the communes, councils and assemblies if they are attacked by capital and/or the state. Democratic Confederalism, therefore, aims to build a dual power peacefully if not attacked by the state, but is not a pacifist movement in that Democratic Confederalism promotes self-defence against capital and the state. Democratic Confederalism is not just about the Kurdish liberation struggle – it aims ultimately for an international social revolution through building structures of radical democracy outside the control of states and capitalism, which can replace these systems one day

## **Pillars and principles of Democratic Confederalism**

Democratic Confederalism has three main pillars that are underpinned by a number of principles.

The first pillar is women's liberation. The Kurdish Freedom Movement feels that this is the most important pillar. The reason why is that they analysed that the oppression of women and the exploitation of women's labour was the first hierarchy that arose over 5000 years ago when states and classes first arose in the Middle East – states are instruments of minority ruling class rule (historically the ruling class were only elite men). It was the oppression of women on which the later oppression and exploitation of impoverished men was built too. To free everyone, therefore, women have to achieve liberation

The second pillar is to build an ecological society. Democratic Confederalism views human beings as part of the ecology, not above it. Capitalism, however, views the ecology as something to exploit in the pursuit of ever-increasing profits. Indeed, capitalism is based on the principle of growth or death. If the human species is to survive, capitalism needs to be replaced by an ecological economy to meet peoples' needs, without oppression and exploitation of humans and the destruction of the ecology. Hence, Democratic Confederalism's commitment to social ecology

The third pillar is to extend a participatory democracy into all areas of life be they social, political and economic to overcome patriarchy and all hierarchies including class and race. The key principles and practices underlying these pillars are solidarity, mutual aid, respect, dignity, collective discipline, self-reflection, communalism and self and collective criticism

## **Why these principles and practices?**

Democratic Confederalism as an ideology, political vision and way of organising developed out of a reflective process by activists within the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

Before the late 1990s, activists that were linked to the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) aimed to achieve national liberation through armed struggle and founding a workers' state with the PKK as the vanguard.

In the late 1990s these activists began to critically analyse whether this was the best path by examining the history of national liberation struggles and past revolutions – including the Russian Revolution. Activists also studied the history of the Middle East and how patriarchy, class and states arose and why. Through this, they came to see that hierarchies and states could not bring about liberation. The activists also looked at other revolutionary traditions beyond Marxist-Leninism.

They drew on the social ecologist and libertarian socialist writings of Murray Bookchin (who was an activist in the USA who started as a trade unionist, moved away from Stalinism to libertarian socialism and developed the theory of social ecology). They also drew elements from activist-analysts like Immanuel Wallerstein (who was sociologist who was deeply impacted by the worldwide revolutionary upheavals of 1968 and who helped develop the world system theory that views capitalism as divided into a core and periphery. The core are high tech producing developed countries; while the periphery are countries that offer low wage production and are producers of primary goods. In this theory too, capitalism is seen commodifying every aspect of the social and natural world). As part of the reflection, activists in the Kurdish Freedom Movement also looked at some of the practices of movements like the Zapatistas (the Zapatistas are

a non-hierarchical movement that also broke with Marxist-Leninism and are struggling for self-governance, autonomy and a cooperative economy against capitalism and the state in Mexico).

Through reflection, mass education and critical thinking the activists in the Kurdish Freedom Movement formulated Democratic Confederalism and moved away from trying to create a Kurdish socialist state. They rather chose to build a mass movement to win struggles for housing, water and sanitation today, but with the aim of also creating socialism without a state based on structures of direct democracy and an economy to meet the needs of all, called communalism, in the future

## **Democratic Confederalism, ideology and education**

Ideology and political education are seen as vital within Democratic Confederalism. The reason being: if a movement does not have its own very clear ideology it will come to incorporate aspects of the dominate ideology linked to hierarchies, capitalism, racism, patriarchy and nation states.

Therefore, a clear ideology is vital for struggle and provides a practice, vision and aim. Through extensive analyses of the problems of capitalism, nation states, past revolutions and critical self-analysis, reflection, discussion and debate Democratic Confederalism became underpinned by a clear ideology. To ensure all activists and people can analyse and participate in the movement, based on the ideology of Democratic Confederalism, mass education is central. Education to assist build the consciousness, the abilities and confidence of activists is vital so that everyone can collectively and actively create new forms of organisation and implement the principles and aims of Democratic Confederalism, rather than rely on “big men” or so-called messiahs to bring liberation.

To undertake mass education, every street – which is a commune – where Democratic Confederalism is organised in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq has an “academy”. Academies are spaces of learning and reflection – it can even be someone’s house – where political education is undertaken and where there are ongoing educational sessions on women’s oppression, limits of the nation state, critiques of capitalism, social ecology and importantly on Democratic Confederalism. Academies also have practical courses that benefit each street commune collectively such as healthcare.

States and capitalism aim to educate members of the working class to obey orders and be useful to produce profit for bosses and taxes for the state. Activists need to educate each other for liberation and this is at the heart of Democratic Confederalism.

## **Democratic Confederalism as a resistance movement and way of organising**

Democratic Confederalism as a resistance movement to capitalism, patriarchy and the state involves organising at a street level where between 20 to 400 households form a “commune”. The commune meets regularly and is open to everyone regardless of gender, age, religion and race and is based on direct democracy. In the commune there are different committees through which people run the politics, law, economy, healthcare, women’s organising, youth organising, media, safety and political education at a street level. Communes are then federated together at a

neighbourhood level, a city level, a provincial level, a national level and even an international level through mandated and recallable communal delegates to councils. This differs from representative democracy (seen today in political parties, many social movements, trade unions, parliaments and the state) where power is given to representatives to make decisions.

Rather in Democratic Confederalism communes have the power: delegates to structures such as city, provincial and national councils carry mandates. This means delegates are given instructions by the communes and under those mandates they co-ordinate and carry out administrative functions. If they go beyond their mandates, they can be recalled and replaced. Through these structures protests are undertaken and broad self-defence organised.

At an economic level, in places where Democratic Confederalism is a resistance movement, worker and women co-operatives are established to meet very basic needs on a street level, such as bread. They assist people to meet very basic needs even though capitalism remains in place – in other words they help communities alleviate the worst aspects that capitalism causes, such as hunger, whilst actively resisting the system.

## **Democratic Confederalism and the Rojava Revolution**

One place where activists have fully replaced the state with Democratic Confederalism through a revolution is in Rojava in north eastern Syria. In Rojava people overthrew the Syrian state in 2012 through mass protests and taking over military bases and state buildings as part of the Arab Spring. There a new society without the state has been organised based on communes and there are different committees at street level to deal with healthcare, housing, women's liberation etc.

The communes are confederated together through delegates to neighbourhood assemblies, city councils, provincial councils and an overarching coordinating structure called the Syrian Democratic Council. The delegates at each structure are always comprised of two people: a man and a woman. The delegates do not have decision making powers on their own – decisions are made by the communes and coordinated by delegates in the councils.

There are also women's formations in the communes, assemblies and councils that are confederated under the banner of the women's movement called Kongra Star. If a majority of women within any structure feel a decision is wrong, even if there is an overall majority of men and some women, the women can override the decision, which is aimed at addressing patriarchy. Each commune has its own structures of community self-defence – in which women of all ages play a key role – and a participatory court to ensure community safety. There is no police force as there would be in a state as through self-defence by all at a commune level safety is ensured.

In Rojava it is not just Kurdish people who are involved in the communes and councils, but also Arab, Assyrian and Turkish people. Democratic Confederalism has, therefore, started to overcome racism within northern Syria (the Kurdish people were racially oppressed in northern Syria but view Democratic Confederalism as central to everyone's liberation).

In terms of the economy, state owned land in northern Syria (which was the dominant form of property) has been redistributed to agricultural co-operatives that have been established and linked to the communes. The only big industry in Rojava is oil and it has been socialised under the Syrian Democratic Council, and it is mandated to produce to meet the needs of all people in Rojava. As a way to overcome capitalism, many worker co-operatives have been formed to produce for need and not profit – these too are directly linked to communes. Some of these

co-operatives are large: there is one housing co-operative for women that has 20 000 members and is organised through Kongra Star, but most are small or medium sized. Small and medium sized businesses still exist and even still outnumber the co-operatives, but they are accountable to communes to ensure they have role to play in meetings people's needs. While they can make some profit, communes have the power to prevent profit gouging as businesses are answerable to the community in the commune if they do so.

Capitalism, therefore, has not been fully ended but the idea is to continuously weaken it and push it towards an end. So in Rojava the forms of organisations and structures that were built by activists as a resistance movement have, after a social revolution, become the structures through which people collectively and democratically govern society.

## **Lessons of Democratic Confederalism for South Africa**

There are a number of lessons we can draw for South Africa from Democratic Confederalism and its ideology and form of organising. Perhaps the most important lesson is that it is possible to build organisations of People's Power that are participatory and based on direct democracy – since 1994 there has been an ideological onslaught from the state, capital, political parties, and even some trade unions against this. We do have experience with such structures of People's Power in the form of street committees, or what are called communes in Democratic Confederalism, that were so prevalent in the 1980s in South Africa. A lesson is we need to once again begin to organise extensively at a street level through mass meetings and street-based structures like assemblies/committees/communes if we are going to build a new movement to bring about liberation. In other words, we as activists have to intensify organising people on our streets and building structures, such as street level assemblies, that draw people into a movement based on the challenges and problems they face and want to themselves overcome – which are caused by patriarchy, racism and ultimately the state and capitalism. This means energy must be focused on building structures and organising at a street level as opposed to a situation where many activists currently spend time trying to build centralised organisations, and only once these exist attempt to recruit people

A further lesson is that building a new movement based once again on street committees/assemblies or communes, as Democratic Confederalism shows, has to be based on progressive principles and practices such as accountability, self-and-collective-discipline, direct democracy, self-organisation and communalism. Therefore, we as activists should not only be promoting such principles, but living them as far as possible in practice. It is only through building grassroots structures of People's Power that we can transform society in a progressive direction through focusing first and foremost on struggles in our communities, on our streets and as will be discussed, also in workplaces.

Political parties and a big man who are often self-appointed leaders cannot address the inequalities, poverty and lack of real democracy for a majority of people as they are based on state logic and hierarchy – only building new forms of organisation and organising can help to bring liberation. Democratic Confederalism, along with our own experiences locally, gives us a model to use and adapt.

Democratic Confederalism shows that once street level structures – street assemblies/communes – and community movements have been built, they also have to be confederated and

linked via recallable mandated delegates in structures like township wide councils, city level councils, provincial councils, a national council and perhaps even an international council.

The reason for this is because if we do not confederate structures like street assemblies/committees/communes, our organising and presence will remain isolated, the state could easily keep struggles localised too, and our struggles could become hostile to anyone outside our community (which in the end is self-defeating). If we are to achieve liberation and overcome state structures (which are oppressive) and capitalism (which is exploitative) we need a dual power based on confederated street level structures, like assemblies, that involve large numbers of people as active participants. What Democratic Confederation shows, therefore, is we need a collective power, but one where people at the grassroots hold and exercise such power.

So people should not be representatives who are given power to make decisions if they are sent from the street assemblies to township wide councils for example. Rather they must be delegates who carry mandates from below and must be accountable to the people that have given them their mandate. It is only through delegates that are mandated and that co-ordinate the wishes of the street assemblies/committees/communes that a truly participatory dual power can be built. We should though not fool ourselves into thinking that the task of building this will be easy. It will be hard work and will take time. There is, however, a base (although small) in the form of existing social/community movements to begin to rebuild such as People's Power in South Africa.

Democratic Confederation shows mass political education has to be central to movement building based on reflection, critical analysis and developing a coherent and truly progressive ideology. Too often in South Africa activists adopt modes and ways of organising like parties and trade unions that have failed to achieve liberation, and/or look to imitate past revolutions that too have failed. So, the lesson is education has to develop critical thinking and to do that we have to honestly critique past revolutions and where they went wrong – including South Africa's liberation struggle – and even our own practices and beliefs. It is only through education, reflection, discussions and debates that a clear ideology that guides struggles can be developed for the context of South Africa. Unfortunately, in some struggles in South Africa there has been a recent trend to stop debates, critical discussion and even freedom of speech – this is counter to liberation and needs to be reversed.

The task, therefore, is for activists to build spaces and programmes of education for each other, but more vitally for the people in the areas and streets where we live. Another important lesson is that there also needs to be spaces of reflection at every level, as without reflection mistakes are often repeated, strategy never effectively developed, and appropriate tactics deployed. Indeed, without political education there cannot be a mass movement that is participatory, that is clear about its objectives, and that has progressive principles, values and practices. Without political education, in short, there can be no liberation .

We can also draw lessons from Democratic Confederation about the need for women's liberation to be central. This does not mean that we forget about fighting other issues such as class and racism – all hierarchies, oppressions and exploitation must be actively fought through ideology and praxis. Far too often however, structures, formations, trade unions and political parties replicate patriarchy and are permanently headed by messiahs or big leaders that permanently hold power. This needs to change and to do so practices such as direct democracy and accountability are needed along with political education.



Indeed, a broader women's movement is needed within People's Power that can push for the centrality of women's liberation — central to direct democracy are women. This should not be some form of token organisation, but an organisation that is central to all struggles and that participates in all structures. True freedom is not to be confused with the right of an individual to selfishly do as they please because no one is free until we are all free and patriarchy needs to be overcome — along with class and racism — for this to become a reality. In society everyone is damaged by hierarchies and oppressions — even oppressors are distorted as human beings by them — but it is only the oppressed that can truly liberate everyone and central to this are working class women.

One major difference between South Africa and Rojava is that the development of capital in in South Africa has been extensive. Workers within Democratic Confederation in Rojava are organised through communes into economic committees. While in South Africa workers should be part of street assemblies/communes and organised through these structures, this in our context will not be enough. There is a strong capitalist class in South Africa — mostly a small part of the white population who owns the means of production, but also a smaller BEE elite.

This class is powerful, and in class terms are allies of the politicians that head the South African state. If we are to defeat capitalism and the oppressive state system — and capitalism's accompanying racism — in South Africa there is a need for workers to also organise at their workplaces. Workers need to win demands that better their wages and working conditions, but also stop the erosion of their rights that they face today. These are the hard struggles that we need to fight.

But workers' struggles cannot just stop at day to day fights. Rather through day to day struggles we need to consciously build towards a longer struggle that aims to socialise the means of production in the future under a People's Power based on confederated assemblies/communes, councils, and forums. Without such an ideological vision we may win some gains, but we will fall back to either begrudgingly accepting private property or hoping for nationalisation — nationalisation means the state owns and controls workplaces and when this has happened in the past workers were still oppressed and exploited, but by states and their managers .

For workers, however, to organise today we need new forms of organisation in workplaces. Trade unions today have proven not to be the most effective organisations to organise workers anymore — indeed they have repeatedly failed to organise the majority of workers who are precarious, because it does not pay to do so. The majority of unions are also tied to parties and, at best, have the mistaken notion that if the party they back comes to head a state (whether capitalist or a "workers'" state), then that state will bring liberation — which historically has proven false.

Importantly, new forms of worker organising and organisation have started to emerge in South Africa and in these are the seeds too of liberation. These have mainly been formed by precarious workers who built structures such as worker committees and forums. In 2012/13 there were the farm and mineworker committees, and today there are worker forums amongst precarious workers in Gauteng and farm workers in the Eastern Cape. In reality, why worker forums and committees are so important is that they were and are effective — through these farm workers and miners won huge gains — and they also potentially carry the seeds of change within them. There, therefore, needs to be a focus amongst activists of building more new forms of worker organisations in the form of committees and forums based on principles and practices of direct democracy and accountability. It would be important too, once many worker committees and forums have been established, to begin to confederate them through delegate systems and struc-

tures, which could be industrial area wide councils and city-wide councils etc. This would be to ensure that individual struggles at a workplace cannot be isolated by capitalists and the state and to ensure the co-ordination of workers' struggles across the country.

We also need to recognise that the building of worker forums and committees has, however, sometimes been a stop-start process. For example, the farm and mine worker committees collapsed partially because the state and capital attacked them. But they also collapsed because the workers involved failed to see how powerful these structures really were due to an ideology not existing amongst the majority of workers that held the vision that these new forms of organisation could be political alternatives to trade unions. Like the street assemblies/communes, therefore, workers' forums and committees would need to focus on the day to day struggles on the workplace floor, but also need to be influenced by a vision or ideology that takes us beyond capitalism and prepares the structures we are building today to become structures to take over the economy in the future. The forums and committees, therefore, also need to be seen as structures that can in the long run fight for and take over the means of production for all through a process of socialisation. For this political education is once again central.

To ensure genuine socialisation during a revolutionary process and to also connect day to day struggles of communities and workers together before such a process, worker forums/committees would need to be directly connected to street assemblies/communes. A confederated structure that has mandated delegates from the street assemblies/communes and worker forums/committees is one way to do this. Another way is also to organise workers in the communes/street assemblies where they live – as workers are also community members. Through this, direct links can be created between street assemblies/communes and workers' forums/committees and so become one movement.

For too long we have copied hierarchical ways of organising, like political parties and today's trade unions, that have divided worker and community struggles. Expanding the organic forms of organisation – in terms of street assemblies/committees and worker forums/committees – that have emerged amongst the working class in South Africa past and present, and combining these with the practice of confederalism and a long term vision of a new society offers a way to move beyond the ideologies and forms of organising that have divided. Democratic Confederalism and Rojava shows such a way of organising through direct democracy and confederating various structures is not impossible – it has been done and it is possible.

As a famous revolutionary once said: We have a world to win.

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