

The party is haunting us again

Shawn Hattingh

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Karl Marx once said that history repeats itself, first as a tragedy then as a farce. A case in point is that in South Africa sections of the left are once again calling for a mass workers' party (MWP) to be formed to contest elections – this they believe will bring us closer to revolution. History says otherwise.

Of course the new calls for a MWP stem from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) breaking from the African National Congress (ANC). As an outcome NUMSA is exploring the possibility of setting up a MWP to contest elections. Many Marxist and leftist influenced organisations, but also cadres within NUMSA, are therefore providing reasons why activists should be interested in such a party.

Some of the reasons they have been giving in support of forming such a party have included: a good showing by such a party will strengthen struggles; a MWP party can unite the working class; a MWP can provide the working class with the correct ideological line of march; a MWP in the legislature – whether at a local, provincial or national level – will be able to make mass propaganda for the cause of socialism; gains and pro-working class policies could be secured by contesting state power; a MWP heading the state could provide greater welfare; and if a MWP gains control over the state it could nationalise key industries, bringing socialism closer. Others, while advocating for a MWP, have taken a slightly different view influenced by the notion of 'revolutionary parliamentarianism' and they argue such a party could enter into parliament to expose the sham of parliamentary democracy and the current state; and that through this it could supposedly open the eyes of the working class, bringing revolution nearer and setting the stage for a so-called workers' state.

Looking back over the history of MWPs, which first appeared as social democratic parties in the nineteenth century, none have fully lived up to the promises cited above. Throughout history no MWP has united the working class. This is because within working class politics different traditions have existed and an anti-party and anti-electoral strand has always existed. For a period between 1870 and 1920 it was the dominant form of revolutionary politics amongst the working class. In fact, the First International, which existed from 1864 to 1871 and aimed to bring working class organisations internationally together, split around the issue of MWPs and electoralism; with some including Marx going the MWP path and a majority rejecting parties and electioneering in favour of anti-state revolutionary politics through anarchism/syndicalism.

Today in South Africa there are also many activists, certainly within community organisations and struggles, that are anti-party and anti-electoralism. The vast majority of these activists are not anarchists (given the very limited influence of anarchism in South Africa), but have a deep mistrust of political parties, and politicians – even left-wing ones – entering into the state. This comes from experience. A new MWP, therefore, will in all likelihood not receive this section of the working class's support. Thus, a MWP, given history and given the anti-party sentiment of a section of the working class in South Africa, will not bring unity to the working class.

Gains for the working class have also very seldom been brought about simply by MWPs winning elections or even gaining hold of state power. Rather struggle, including strikes, protests, revolts and revolutionary upheavals, have led to the working class winning gains from the ruling class. How the working class first won an 8 hour working day is a prime example of this. Two of the first states to concede to an 8 hour work day were Germany and Spain. In these countries it was not due to the clever parliamentarian work of MWPs, nor them having state power, that

led to workers winning an 8 hour work day; but rather massive struggles outside of the electoral realm and against the state by the working class.

In Germany the 8 hour working day was implemented in 1918. It, sadly, was implemented not because of the sterling work of a MWP, but rather was legalised as part of a betrayal by a MWP – the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) – of a working class revolution. At the time the SPD still claimed to be Marxist and said it wanted to overthrow capitalism while promoting and practicing electoral politics. In November 1918 workers, sailors and soldiers in Germany were establishing councils and were pushing for a genuine form of socialism based on direct democracy. It looked as if there was a possibility of them overthrowing both capitalism and the state. In this context a MWP, the SPD, made a deal with the ruling class in Germany. It defended capitalism in return for gaining state power. As part of this it set up army corps that were loyal to it and even supported and deployed the right-wing paramilitary Freikorps to put down and break the revolution. The SPD-controlled unions also agreed to prevent workers seizing the means of production in exchange for capitalists recognising these unions and agreeing to an 8 hour working day. It was thus the spectre of revolution, eventually crushed by the SPD in alliance with right-wing paramilitaries, which led to the 8 hour working day being conceded to and legislated for in Germany.

Likewise, in Spain the 8 hour working day was not implemented due to a MWP pushing for it in parliament. It resulted from the concessions the ruling class were forced to make as a result of massive pressure from a 44-day general strike in 1919 by workers in anarchist/syndicalist unions. Indeed, the working class has never won any benefits without struggle and to think simply electing people from MWPs into legislatures will bring gains is dangerous.

More importantly, no MWP in history has come near to establishing socialism, even when they have headed up a state. This holds true even for the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union under a so-called workers' state. In other words, no MWP has ever brought about a society where exploitation and alienation has been ended; where direct democracy in the workplace and in society in general has flourished; where all forms of oppression, including racism and sexism, have been ended; where there are no rulers and ruled; where the divisions between mental and manual labour are broken; where the economy and wealth are socialised; and where society is based not on profit, but on meeting all people's needs through democratic planning. In the cases of the SPD and the Bolsheviks in power, they even actively fought against this. Thinking that a MWP could begin to deliver on socialism, therefore, ignores the facts of history. Those advocating for a MWP in South Africa should perhaps bear this in mind.

Centred towards state power

One of the central reasons why MWPs have not brought about a genuine form of socialism – as opposed to reforming capitalism or embarking on state capitalism – is their orientation to contesting and capturing state power. Indeed, many of those advocating for NUMSA to form a MWP have taken words such as those of Leon Trotsky to heart when he said: “Every political party worthy of the name strives to capture political power and thus place the State at the service of the class whose interests it expresses”¹. The problem with such thinking, and a fatal flaw within the logic of MWPs, is that the state cannot simply be taken over by the working class and wielded as a revolutionary tool, even if it is a so-called workers' state.

States can't be used for liberation

The reason for this is that states emerged to ensure that elite minorities could and can wield power over a majority. States, therefore, came into being when societies based on class first arose. The purpose states were built to fulfil was to ensure that an elite could rule and accumulate wealth through using the state they controlled to keep a majority subservient, oppressed and exploited. As such states have always been tools and instruments of elite rulers and their class. This defining feature of all states means they can't be used for liberation; it is not the purpose for which they arose. In fact, if there was no inequality or class rule, states would not exist.

How states work to ensure that the ruling class maintains power and wealth can easily be seen under capitalism. Today we have huge states that ensure the interests of the ruling class (capitalists, politicians and top officials in the state) are protected and furthered. Through the state's legislative, judiciary, economic, military and policing arms, the state always protects and enforces the property interests of this class by protecting and enforcing minority property ownership, whether it be private and/or state-owned property. Along with this, states today legalise exploitation along with attempting to create an environment in which capitalism can generally function. These massive institutions cannot be simply wielded in the interest of the working class. Indeed, their function is to keep the working class oppressed.

Of course states use ideology and propaganda to ensure the working class accepts its own oppression. One source which states often perversely use in an attempt to ideologically neuter the working class is the fact that they provide some welfare and socially-useful services. Of course states, as discussed above in relation to the 8 hour working day, were forced to provide such services due to massive working class struggles and, often, the real threat of revolution. As such, welfare represents a gain of past mass struggles. Nonetheless, states and the ruling classes controlling them were also willing to make concessions based on the calculation that to do so would limit the possibility of future revolts. States then, for propaganda purposes, falsely claimed that it was their 'benevolence' that led to welfare. This is then used by states even today in order to claim they exist for the benefit of all classes. In other words they use the provision of welfare to try and mask the fact they exist to enforce class rule by an elite minority. What is, of course, not mentioned is that the need for welfare only exists because of class rule and capitalism; and that the resources states spend on welfare ironically also originally derive from the exploitation of the working class. A MWP in state power providing greater welfare does not overturn this reality.

The greatest weapon states – and the elite that control and influence them – have for ensuring class rule is the legal monopoly they have on violence. When strikes or protests escalate states deploy the police and even military to put them down. Even peaceful protests and strikes often face police repression. If open revolt against capitalism or class rule breaks out, states have always reacted violently, even to the point of waging civil war. Under the Soviet Union, even under Lenin and a so-called workers' state, this too took place. There the state was used to violently defend Bolshevik rule and the privileges of those who headed the state. For example, the Soviet state ruthlessly put down strikes in Petrograd in 1921. Many of the workers involved were questioning the lavish lifestyles that Communist Party officials and managers were living. Later in the year, the Soviet state also used the military to crush a revolt in Kronstadt – those involved in the revolt questioned Bolshevik rule because the Bolshevik leaders had become an elite. These workers wanted the state to be replaced by a genuine form of working class democracy based on

worker councils (Soviets). Far from being used as a weapon of liberation, MWP's therefore have a history of using the state to violently ensure their own rule once in state power – as such they have not brought about socialism. The question for South African activists is: would a MWP in state power in South Africa really act differently?

States too are also capitalist entities in their own right. Many states still own factories, farms, mines and banks and in these workers are oppressed and exploited. A prime example is how the South African state exploits workers in Eskom. But such exploitation is not limited to South Africa. Workers in factories owned by the Venezuelan state also face exploitation and oppression. Indeed, major struggles have been fought in the steel factories owned by the Venezuelan state. No state throughout history, even when MWP's have headed it, has allowed socialism to blossom or the working class to genuinely control the means of production.

Even under the Soviet Union, it was a state bureaucracy that controlled the means of production. The working class remained oppressed and exploited and under the heels of the Bolshevik-controlled state. As a matter of fact, it was the Bolshevik Party in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917 that created this situation: it nationalised factories that were taken over by workers, it destroyed workers' self-management and replaced it with one-man management and it destroyed working class democracy in the Soviets. The Soviet Union, therefore, was not a socialist state, but rather a form of state capitalism – it never allowed the working class to have genuine workers' self-management/control. If a MWP nationalised the means of production in South Africa this would not be socialism. Consequently, to call on people to form and vote for a MWP in South Africa on the basis it will nationalise the means of production runs the risk of fostering a false belief amongst the working class that nationalisation equals socialism. The reality is under nationalisation, the state would own and control factories, banks, farms and mines; not the working class. Indeed, if the working class genuinely had power and control over the means of production there would be no need for a state and nationalisation – states only exist because a few need to enforce their rule and control over the economy.

The centralisation of states has consequences

In order to carry out the rule of an elite, all states have been centralised and hierarchical. As such, orders in all states flow down a chain of command. Only a few can and do rule. To carry out instructions from above, large bureaucracies always develop. This too attracts opportunists and careerists, as through states individual wealth and power can be accumulated via large salaries, patronage networks and corruption.

The reality is so even under a parliamentary system. Most high-ranking state officials, including generals, director-generals, police commissioners, state legal advisors, state attorneys, judges, managers and CEOs of parastatals, officials in the various departments and magistrates are never elected by the people. They are not answerable to the working class, but to their line of managers. Most of their decisions, policies and actions will never be known by the vast majority of people – the top-down centralised structure of states ensures this. Even if a MWP was formed in South Africa and came to head some form of state, it could not change the centralised nature of the state. Centralisation and the state go hand-in-hand.

Likewise it is parliamentarians and the executive (presidents, premiers, mayors and all their ministers) that make and pass laws; not the mass of people. In fact, parliamentarians are not

truly accountable to voters (except for 5 minutes every 5 years) and this is so even where MWP's have entered into parliament. While a MWP may occasionally make noise in parliament, there is actually a very long history around the world of parliamentarians of MWP's acting in their own interests, including voting for high salaries and betraying the working class. This is because parliamentarians, even from MWP's, don't receive mandates and are not recallable by the working class. The way parliamentary democracy functions means parliamentarians vote and decide on policy and legislation within the confines of legislature – they don't go back to the working class to gain approval for their actions. Those advocating for a MWP in South Africa, therefore, consciously or unconsciously avoid revealing this truth to the activists they are trying to convince.

States and rulers

States, too, generate an elite and a section of the ruling class. This is central to the reason why MWP's going into the state and electioneering will not and cannot deliver socialism and an end to class rule. When people enter into top positions in states – including, historically, in so-called workers' states – they gain access to the means of administration and coercion and to new privileges. 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 position of a ruler. As such, the centralisation of power, which defines states, generates an elite. This can be seen in Venezuela today where a so-called MWP heads up the state. There top state officials rule, they receive large salaries and they have joined the ruling class. Power there does not lie in the hands of the working class. It would be no different if a MWP were to come to head the state in South Africa.

Consequently, even where MWP's have come to gain state power and even when they have headed what many Marxists have called a workers' state in the early days of the Soviet Union, the leadership of these parties have become a new elite. They have, therefore, either become a new ruling class outright or they have joined the existing ruling class. Indeed, even if a MWP elected to only pay its parliamentarians, top state officials, ministers and President/Prime Minister/Chairperson an average workers' wage, they would still be rulers, they would still have power and they could still decide on policies and law and enforce those. The working class would still not have power.

The state cannot, therefore, be used to bring about socialism nor end class rule. It is preposterous to think that by entering into top positions in the state that a MWP can bring about socialism or even constantly make gains for the working class. The centralised and hierarchical nature of all states throughout history, even so-called workers' states, means this is not possible. States and elite rule are synonymous with one another. This means that a new MWP in South Africa, because of its tactics of centering towards the state, is not going to lead the working class to socialism and end class rule. It may change the faces of the ruling elite, but it will not get rid of the rule by an elite few.

The dangers of a MWP

MWP's and electioneering, consequently, hold many dangers. The orientation towards the state and electioneering carries the danger of creating illusions amongst the working class that the

state can be used for liberation. This is a danger even in cases where advocates arguing for the MWP say that it should only stand in elections to expose the class nature of the current state. In such cases it is unlikely such tactics will bring the revolution closer. Indeed, why call on people to vote representatives into a state when you know it is a sham? Far from leading to people seeing the state as part of the problem, it is likely to create illusions. Consequently, it also leads to the possibility that the working class will view elections, rather than mass struggle, as a focus of their energy. Indeed, many MWPs have diverted people's energies away from struggles, strikes and protests towards electioneering with disastrous consequences.

The idea of the MWP also carries the risk that the working class will shift the focus from building their own organs of struggle towards building a new party. In fact, if NUMSA is to play a revolutionary role, the task of NUMSA comrades is to transform their union into a revolutionary union. That means fighting in the union, too, to make it radically democratic. If a MWP is formed in all likelihood this won't happen – precisely because energies will be diverted into creating something new, the MWP. Likewise, it is also likely that mass struggles and organising in the townships will wane as energies too will be diverted away from building on what already exists into building a MWP.

The greatest threat that MWPs and their orientation to electioneering and the state (even a so-called workers state) pose is promoting the idea amongst the working class that freedom and salvation will come from above and not through its own existing organisations and struggles. Indeed, it promotes the idea that a MWP can substitute for the working class; and that if a MWP had power it would bring freedom. The reality though is liberation won't and can't, by definition, come from above or through substitutionalism. If socialism is to be created it will be created by the working class through its own actions, organisations and struggle and not through the state and a MWP. Indeed, only the working class can liberate itself; and given the nature of states it, by definition, can't come through such structures.

Rather build a revolutionary working class counter-power

Another path, instead of a MWP, which the working class could go down is to rather build its own revolutionary counter-power against not only capitalism, but also the state and all forms of oppression including racism and sexism. Throughout history there have been instances where a counter-power has been built by the working class itself, including Russia during 1917, Germany in 1918, Spain in 1936 and South Africa in the early 1980s. It is, therefore, possible for the class itself – without the so-called guidance of a MWP and without a MWP taking state power – to build its own counter-power. This is perhaps a more long term project and perhaps even a harder task than building a MWP, but it is a task that the working class will have to embark upon if it is to have power in its own hands one day.

The advantage of building a counter-power, though, is that history shows that it could be built through the organisations and movements the working class itself has already begun to create, be it community organisations, unions and worker committees. To build a counter-power the working class would, though, have to strengthen these movements and organisations and transform them into organs of working class direct democracy. They would also have to be infused with a revolutionary politics that aims not just to transform the state and capitalism, but to replace these with a new society.

To build a counter-power though does not mean ignoring the struggle for immediate gains. The working class needs better housing and a decent lifestyle today and can't simply wait for the revolution to have the basics of life. As such the struggles for the things that are needed today to improve the lives of the working class, which includes placing demands on bosses and politicians because they have stolen from the working class, is vital. 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. Importantly though, it cannot also relax if the ruling class do provide such concessions. Rather, winning immediate gains has to be used as a school of struggle and immediate gains have to be used to build on towards revolution.

As part of this, the working class also needs to build towards the goal of seizing the means of production directly through its own organisations and structures; and from there socialise the means of production to meet the needs of all. It can't rely on a MWP or state to do so; because then another power other than the working class would in fact control the means of production. History shows that the means of production can be seized directly by the class in revolutionary situations; for example in Russia in 1917 many factories were seized by the working class and were briefly run by workers' themselves using democratic committees in order to plan production – unfortunately these were destroyed once Lenin and the Bolsheviks consolidated their so-called workers' state.

Instead of MWPs and hoping elections or even a workers' state might bring gains or even revolution, the working class needs to build democratic revolutionary organs and fight so that one day it can take power in society itself and run society through direct democracy without a party instructing it or a state. This can be done using federated organs of direct democracy like worker councils, community assemblies and committees to allow everyone to have an equal say in how society is run. MWPs and voting in parliamentary or municipal elections brings us no closer to building such structures of counter-power. Rather all it does is run the risk of generating further illusions in the state and it risks keeping the working class in chains far into the future. The working class has been in chains for far too long; it is time for the class itself to begin breaking those chains. Only it itself has the power to do so.

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