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The question of state government elections and running a Workers or Socialist political party continues to be raised in the working class movement and the Left globally. As we may know, there was excitement about the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour Party in Britain, left political parties in certain parts of Europe and Latin America and, more recently, certain shifts to more centrist positions in the United States amongst a section of the Democratic Party calling themselves "Democratic Socialists". In South Africa, many workers and some activists seem cautiously optimistic by NUMSA's[1] formation of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party that will seek to participate in the 2019 general elections.

With this in mind, we need to look at issues of social transformation within the framework of what we want to achieve and the relationship between the means and ends of struggle in pursuit of these aims. The historic and ultimate socialist end is a society char-

[1] The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa.

acterised by collective democratic control of the political and economic systems and one without class divisions and oppression of all types – in real terms, a society without the state and capitalism in particular. If this is so, is this revolutionary transformation possible through the means of state power and political parties that aim to capture this form of power? The question is not only one of ideological orientation, but also the strategic and tactical implications imposed by ideological adherence.

Before we get into it, I want to stress that we are participating in and waging a battle of ideas. This is not just between an embattled working class – broadly understood as workers, the unemployed and their families – and the opposing ruling class. It is also a battle of competing tendencies, or ideologies within the working class itself, e.g. nationalism, populism, various Marxist-Leninist tendencies, anarchism/syndicalism, etc. As such, anarchism argues for a political organisation specific to the goals of developing and promoting anarchist ideology, strategy and tactics within the working class and society broadly. The aim is to win the popular classes to its ideas and methods of struggle, resistance and social reconstruction. It is not an anti-organisational approach, but one that argues for an organised, collective and directly-democratic response to the issues posed by the battle of ideas. Anarchism and its trade union strategy, syndicalism, does, however, vehemently oppose the participation of these political organisations in the mechanisms of state rule, including state government elections.

The question of elections and political parties has to be interrogated within the dual contexts of this battle of ideas (inter and intra class) and the relative weakness of union movements in relation to the forces of the ruling class – the state and the corporation. Whereas corporations and their capitalist philosophies have become ubiquitous throughout the world, the influence of unions and the ideas of collective organisation as combative and transformative forces are relatively quite weak. There may be large numbers of workers unionised, but this does not necessarily

translate into socio-economic transformative action through the unions. This general weakness is not only characteristic of unions – many other working class social and Left movements are unable to continue struggles against the oppressive nature of modern day capitalism beyond protests and petitions. As such, much action is defensive in nature (e.g. for wage increases above inflation, for access to affordable energy in poor townships, etc.), and rarely are there attempts at changing the relations of ownership and expanding working class control and power into the economy and society.

It is therefore understandable, in a conjuncture of generally weak workers' and Left formations, that the idea of a Workers Party is appealing for many people and sections of the Left. However, the need to capture state power is also a long-standing idea held and developed by the statist Left ideologies guiding these people. The claim of the need for such a party asserts a new locus for struggle, the voice for socialist ideas and an entity that can bring together working and popular class movements across a range of sectors. Its claim rests on the idea that unions can only ever be economic organisations that aim at day-to-day improvements in the lives of members and workers. An ahistorical claim, if ever there was one! Accordingly, the socio-political realm can only therefore be engaged by a political party that best represents the wishes of the working class as a whole. This they call the vanguard. Another bold claim indeed!

Clearly many people on the Left think the real goal is to achieve state power to realise the promises of the future. In reality this means building a political party and pouring a substantial amount of resources – human and financial – into its development. Many also believe that a Left party, however problematic, would be better than the existing parties, particularly those of the radical right and populists promoting race essentialism and xenophobia, who foment fear of and between different social groupings. History is not

too kind, however, to the belief that political parties are vehicles of radical, progressive, socialist transformation.

The idea of state power is wholly under-scrutinised from a critical perspective. Few discussions, if any, exist within working class organisational circles as to the nature and impact of state power on political organisations and mass formations linked to parties in power. Hardly any debates take place regarding the state's role as an institution of ruling class power and whether or not the state, with its hierarchical structures of centralised, individual control, can ever be accountable to a mass working class base. Also missing in the discussions about elections, parties and the labour movement, is a serious evaluation of the track record of parties – whether in power or in opposition. In this conceptual vaccum, many continue to argue that the problem is existing parties have failed because they have had bad leaders. This may account for the excitement about Corbyn's influence in the UK's Labour Party, Cyril Ramaphosa ascending the ANC throne in South Africa, or Bernie Sanders' popularity in the USA. For others, the problem is bad ideas, with the solution being a better manifesto thereof. However, little attention is paid to structural issues – of organisation, decision-making and control. At the extreme, some of these Left lines of thought propose a better Communist or Socialist Party because of the failure of the historical incumbent. However, there is little interrogation of what these failures were, why they occurred (beyond bad leadership and alliances) and whether or not these failures are inherent to the very idea and hierarchical structure of a self-anointed "vanguard" party.

When we focus attention on these and other such questions, perhaps we can account for what happened to the ANC[2] in South Africa particularly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It suggests more than just the impact of key personalities or even

[2] African National Congress, the ruling party since 1994.

chist/syndicalist. This we can call a counter-hegemonic view, or more precisely a revolutionary counter-culture; the leadership of a revolutionary mind-set won in the day-to-day battle of ideas inside this movement by the political organisation promoting these ideas. This movement of working class organisations, therefore, is to be built on the twin tracks of revolutionary counter-power and counter-culture, focused outside and against the state, and is forged in struggle. The anti-statist position is not one that ignores the state, but realises it as an organ of ruling class power that we are unable to reform in our favour. Our aim is a self-managed, egalitarian form of reconstruction – of our organisations and world – and a future society based on these principles.

This is a call for a prefigurative politics grounded and shaped in working class realities – a politics that marries means of struggle to the social, political and economic ends collectively agreed to. This means revisiting anarchism and syndicalism, and the libertarian left, and leaving the party-state project behind. This means drawing from the deep well of working class history, organisation, theory and practice, moving from a politics of recycling failed statist projects to one that develops confidence in our own initiatives, one that valorises working class unity, ingenuity and independence.

informed by any knowledge of the outcome of their vote, but in the hope that those they elect would actually meet their election promises. This particular form of voting, therefore, reduces society to atomised individual actors alone in the vast political world, reinforces the misplaced idea that it is a meaningful political act, and further undermines the transformative collective political action of the working class and poor. Over time and years of ruling class propaganda, we place more faith in this handover of political power than the potential capabilities of our organisations – the trade union and community-based social movement, the realms of economic and political life where working class people can exercise actual control.

An uncritical approach to discussing the state, parties, unions, organisational structure and the role of voting, prevents the development of an adequate ideological and strategic set of conclusions about what has gone wrong in the past. It also may blind one to what has and continues to achieve real victories. We need to focus less on the overall ideological and strategic orientations of parties and the tactical choices that follow. As I have argued, parties and state power are incapable of creating substantive socialist socio-economic transformation. We should focus more on the process that wins real change – working class struggle by itself, for itself. Even to achieve reforms, we need mass-based struggle from below – at the workplace and in communities. For deeper systemic change, a revolutionary change, we need particular struggles from below – workplace and community struggles for reform that aim at constantly broadening working class organisational control over the immediate means of production, coercion and administration, i.e. everyday life. Both forms of struggle, for reforms and revolution, are indelibly linked. These require building working class counter-power – organisations, especially unions, fomenting a revolutionary front of the oppressed classes. These organisations must also be informed by a new worldview that is socialist/anti-capitalist, anti-statist and non-hierarchical, in other words, anar-

programme. Once in power, the ANC – hierarchically structured and founded on an unprincipled mishmash of neo-liberal capitalist principles trumpeting faith in free markets on the one hand and Developmental State leanings on the other – rapidly developed into a party characterised by state looting, corruption and social repression. There are many similarities shared with liberation movements that came to power elsewhere in the former colonial world, as well as with the old Labour, Workers and Socialist parties in other parts. Once they got into office and despite many promising early initiatives, the new ruling party proved incapable of fostering substantive, transformative socio-economic development.

There are also shared histories amongst trade union movements that chose similar political pathways, particularly of alliance to political parties who claimed to speak on behalf of the working class, or, as in many cases in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the "oppressed nation". In the South African case, an official alliance between the ANC and COSATU[3] has, for various reasons, had a devastating impact on the union movement. Amongst a host of other issues, it has caused the fragmentation of the workers' movement and its organisations, a decline of union democracy, individual jockeying for union position to access wealth and future political power via the ANC (leading to assassinations in many cases), and the spread of corruption. Many of these issues stem from the alliance, with union position seen as a ladder for personal political and economic gain.

We need to look at the trajectory of rot, failure and perhaps even betrayal here in South Africa to understand the similarities between events in post-colonial Africa and elsewhere. This can be a basis for a more informed discussion about ideas for the way forward for the working class – away from mere rhetorical flourishes,

[3] Congress of South African Trade Unions.

sloganeering and rehashing of old ideas that have failed our class again and again.

The reality is that a project of building political parties to capture state power to free the popular classes – through elections or force – has been a colossal failure in relation to its initial socialist aims. Once elected, political parties are incorporated into the institutional life of the state machine. However, not only is the state always an institution of ruling class power, run by and for exploitative economic and political elites, one of its primary goals is to secure its power as an institution over society and its politics. This self-sustaining approach is the very design and function of the state. It exists primarily to secure its control over the means of coercion and administration. It is this key form of control that positions top state managers as key members of the ruling class alongside owners of means of production (as an aside, all states also control substantial productive economic means, such as land, property and corporations like Eskom, Petrobras, the Emirates airline, etc.).

All states are structured as hierarchies of control and privilege – structures that centralise more and more power in fewer and fewer individuals as you go up the chain of command. This very structure is contradictory and opposed, in form and content, to a democratic, emancipatory working class project. Once a party is involved in the self-sustaining state machinery, its leaders are drawn into the day-to-day necessities of the interests of competing parties and politicians. The party and individual representative's mandate must then change from one that may have sought to serve broad social interests, to a primary focus on remaining in political power. Thus, the state, party and politician serve the primary purpose of maintaining their social, economic and political positions of power – control and privilege. The party and its servants are warped to serve this elitist interest, and its leaders, now working and residing in the halls, offices and residences of ruling class political power, become

the very problem they may have sought to rid society of. They now have become part of the ruling class.

Power over daily life, the neighbourhood, policing, education (let's call it the means of administration and coercion) when rested in the hands of the state and its institutions does not and cannot trickle down to the masses; it merely shifts between sections of the ruling class. Let us be clear: the state is a fundamentally undemocratic institution that we have vested with social, political and economic power. Although you may vote for certain representatives in government, government is but ONE arm of the state machine. You do not and cannot, by law, vote to elect leaders of the other arms of the state: the judiciary, the police, the army and state-owned enterprises. Not very democratic, it seems!

If the ANC under Nelson Mandela, the Bolsheviks under Lenin, the SACP under Joe Slovo could not break the pattern – and in many ways reinforced the authoritarian power of the new state institutions they came to control – no way is it going to be different the next time one chooses to vote, no matter the personalities and programmes involved. The desire for state power, and to hold onto it, supersedes all others. There is no basis at all for the faith that new or reformed Left or national liberation political parties will somehow succeed in creating the kind of order that serves the interests (individual and collective) of the working class. This seems a faith based more on ideological dogma, a selective reading of the past, an unscientific analysis, or even just a belief in pursuing a "lesser evil" hoping life would be more tolerable under different rulers. This hope is fair and not to be sneered at, but is not aligned to a vision for a socialist future.

The very act of voting in state government elections is, in and of itself, a dereliction of one's personal political obligation. The act places your power of decision-making in the hands of representatives, and thus is referred to as representative democracy. This is the power to make decisions on your behalf and, usually, without you. Voting in government elections is not done by citizens