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Workers' Solidarity Federation
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10 April 1999

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Why workers should fight GEAR

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Gear is the government's strategy to increase bosses profits, or economic growth, as they call it. We aren't interested in the bosses profits. We want better living conditions.

Gear says that schools' and hospitals' funds should be cut. This will mean more job losses, worse service and less teachers.

Gear also calls for cuts in tertiary education, building houses, and general social spending. This means less houses for the homeless, unaffordable university rates, low pensions and general misery.

Gear says that government owned property and companies should be privatised. This will increase prices as the new owners try to raise their profits by raising their prices. This will make transportation, sanitation, running water, and basic services too expensive. These new bosses will also try to increase their profits by lowering wages and forcing workers to work harder for the same pay. Privatisation will increase prices and lower wages, and government will contribute far less to basic social services.

Gear says that taxes on bosses should be dropped. Workers will pay much more than their share of the taxes. Government will have even less money to spend on schools, hospitals, houses, pensions etc for workers, while workers support the government through the taxes they pay.

Gear says that exchange controls should be dropped. This will make South African bosses compete with foreign bosses by dropping workers' wages, making them work harder and laying off more workers.

Gear says that workers should accept low wages and harder work to attract foreign investment. This goes hand in hand with the bosses lie that low wages creates more jobs. When workers get higher wages, they buy more goods, which boosts the factories producing these goods. More workers are hired to make the extra goods. These workers also buy goods, which further boosts the factories.

When workers get lower wages, they buy less goods. The factories sell less and fire the extra workers. These extra workers can no longer buy goods, further hurting the factories.

So if we demand higher wages, we don't get foreign investment, but if we accept lower wages, we have higher unemployment.

But do we need foreign investment, when South Africa is rich in gold and diamonds, has many farms and has developed many industries? No, we don't need so much foreign investment. We must fight for shorter work weeks, so that the bosses must employ more people to do the job. We must build trade unions for the unemployed, so that they won't scab during strikes, but rather help us in achieving our demands. This happened in Northern Europe in the 1930s and was an enormous success for workers.

If we do not build trade unions for the unemployed, right wing groups like "unemployed masses of South Africa" will get the unemployed to help bosses against workers. This will keep wages low and make us work harder, which will increase unemployment and push prices up.

Gear is a bosses program.

We must fight GEAR if we want better lives. If we don't fight GEAR, we will have something like Chile under Pinochet [neoliberal dicator]: wages in 1975 dropped by 13%, while the inflation on bread was 22 700%

But if we want to fight Gear, we must understand it. Gear is not limited to South Africa. Gear is all over the world and has many names, like "neoliberalism" and "rationalisation." Big antiworker organisations like the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund support Gear-like programs and give loans to governments who implement these programs against workers. When a government refuses, these organisations call on big governments to implement sanctions against the refusing government, cause racism and civil wars in the refusing countries and/or replace the government with a dictatorship willing to implement these anti-worker programs.

We cannot expect that the government is going to stop with GEAR. The IMF and similar organisations won't allow it to. Workers *must* fight it. But if workers only fight it in South Africa, these antiworker organisations can crush us. We must fight it internationally and in South Africa. We must fight Gear here and help workers in other countries fight Gear-like programs in their own countries, by helping them fight their bosses, through boycotts and any other method. Then when bosses in South Africa mistreat us, we ask that they do the same to help us. The Gear idea is international and we must fight it internationally!

We must fight Gear in the trade unions: on the shop floor! Gear attacks workers so workers should use their weapons, trade unions, against Gear. Here political alliances are a problem. As all governments are expected to implement Gear-like programs, all parties will be expected to do so. If there are alliances between parties and trade unions, the parties will expect the trade union members to accept the Gear-like programs. The anc-COSATU alliance shows

this very well: Mr Thabo Mbeki told Cosatu members to “shut up” and accept gear!

Parties will be the vehicles for implementing Gear-like programs. Trade unions will be the vehicles for fighting Gear-like programs. Alliances between parties and trade unions will severely weaken the struggle against the Gear idea. If we want to destroy the Gear idea, they must end all alliances with all parties.

Bosses will also try to stop us in our fight against gear by ‘buying’ trade union officials and leaders. Our solution to this problem is a different trade union structure, called syndicalism. This structure has no full time officials and elected members do the administration. If they don’t do what the members tell them to, the members can debate, and then vote, on recalling them and electing new administrators. This method can be extended much further: If we were to start an anti-Gear group right now, then we could elect people to do the admin, someone to communicate between us and other groups etc. Then, if one of the administrators or other elected officials did something which they did not get our permission to do, and we didn’t want them to do it, we could call an assembly and vote on recalling the offending official and electing a new one.

But if we want this structure in our trade unions, we first have to convince all the other members of this idea and then get them to help change the union structure. This would be a national campaign and take a while, but we won’t stop Gear overnight either.

While we fight Gear, we must fight its source as well: Capitalism. In the past, many socialists have tried to destroy capitalism through government: some took part in elections, trying to destroy capitalism through small reforms and social spending, while others overthrew governments and created a completely government controlled economy. The first group did improve the lives of many workers, but when the world economy went into a slump in the 1970s, they were the first to take back those reforms. The second group’s tyranny is well known: Pol Pot, Stalin and friends.

What the first group of socialists did not understand is that government would make them drop their socialist principles. Those who remained committed socialists, such as Allende from Chile, were killed. This is because decision-making power does not lie in government, but in company board rooms. He decided to make decisions which scared the companies, so they decided to overthrow and kill him.

The second group of socialists took full control of society, and got so much power that they were completely corrupted. This caused Pol Pot’s and Stalin’s actions.

Neither of these types of socialists ever created socialism. They created a new form of capitalism: state capitalism.

In the 1970s, the world economy went into a slump, which gave capitalists an excuse to blame state capitalism. They dug up old and failed ideas and put “neo” at the beginning of their names, to make them sound new: neoliberalism from “liberalism” and “neo-colonialism” from colonialism. They also created new names, such as rationalism. These ideas are the same, and in South Africa, they are called Gear. This is the “new” form of capitalism.

We are against capitalism and the government. We believe that socialism can only come through a revolution by workers in syndicalist trade unions and syndicalist-like civics, who will destroy all governments and take over workplaces *and* society, and run it the way we propose to run the syndicalist trade unions, for the benefit of all workers. This is real socialism. Socialism is *not* dead. State Capitalism is dying. We need to fight against Gear and capitalism, and fight for socialism.