

Everything Must Change: South Africa's Fork in the Road

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ROAPE's Leo Zeilig talks to Trevor Ngwane about political developments in South Africa, the crisis in the ANC, the growth of new struggles on the left, in the universities and workplaces. Ngwane is a long-standing socialist activist, researcher and writer.

Can you please, first of all, introduce yourself and explain something about your own political developments, through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s?

I was born the same year the ANC was banned in 1960. My parents, who were both medical nurses, left the country but came back two years later. My father was enthused by his brief stay in Dar es Salaam where he had a whiff of the political ferment there, the spirit of African liberation under Nyerere. At that time this Tanzanian city was a hotbed of revolution with most African liberation movements having offices there. I remember this because when he talked about "Dar" my father's eyes would light up and he would get very excited. My aunt, Victoria Chitepo, who has very recently passed away, was married to Herbert Chitepo, the ZANU chairperson who was assassinated in Zambia in 1975. My family lived a bit in Zimbabwe, then called Rhodesia, and Tanzania, then called Tanganyika. Then we came back to live in South Africa where my father was always being visited by the Special Branch police. I think they tortured him at some point because he used to tell stories about police torture.

I remember the 1973 Durban strikes as I used to visit my aunt in Lamontville, Durban. Everyone was excited and talking about it in the township with workers going around shouting "Usuthu!" which is a Zulu war cry. I was a high school student during the 1976 June 16 student uprising. There was a student strike at our school in Mariannhill, a Roman Catholic boarding school which Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness leader who was killed by apartheid police, attended in 1964. My university days at Fort Hare University were also marked by "student disturbances" as the struggle against apartheid got into gear in the country and abroad. Bheki Mlangeni, an anti-apartheid lawyer who was assassinated with earphone bombs that exploded in his ears, was a student during my time there.

In the 1980s I got drawn into the struggle when studying and then later teaching at Wits University in Johannesburg. I also became active in the township civics as I was living in Soweto, Central Western Jabavu. In 1986 I spent two weeks in detention after police swooped onto campus arresting and beating up students during the many demonstrations that took place then. Marxist lecturers dominated the humanities and there was a line of division between the nationalists and the socialists although everyone claimed to be a socialist and everyone supported national liberation. I became a Trotskyist round about 1989 joining the Socialist Workers League, which later became the Socialist Group, and I am still a member today. At that time there were a lot of socialist groups in operation despite the ban on Marxism and socialist politics. When I lost my job as a Sociology junior lecturer in 1989 I coordinated the Wits Workers School, a workers' literacy project on campus, and in 1993 got a job in a COSATU union, the Transport and General Workers' Union where I was later twice

expelled for opposing what I called the politics of class collaboration of the ANC, SACP and COSATU leadership.

In the township we were busy setting up civic structures, street committees and later self-defence units during the political violence of the 1990s. I also worked a bit with the ANC underground and joined the organisation when it got unbanned in 1990. I joined the SACP for six months and found their “heavy duty” Marxism mechanistic; practically they were intent on subordinating the workers struggle to a nationalist not socialist programme. However, we all had to work together on the ground building civics, the ANC, unions, calling meetings, stay-aways, mobilising for an ANC victory, etc. This culminated in my becoming a public representative (ward councillor) for my area in Pimville, Soweto, where I was now living with my family.

A short time after the 1994 settlement there were voices that began to be raised about the failure, limits, that the new ANC government had imposed on any serious programme of reform. Could you explain a little of the settlement and your role in slowly emerging criticism and movements that challenged it?

I was expelled by the ANC in 1999 for opposing the privatisation of municipal services in my capacity as a local councillor. The struggle against privatisation had begun when the ANC government ditched the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a mildly redistributive policy, and adopted the decidedly “neoliberal” Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme in 1996. At the forefront of the struggle was the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), a COSATU affiliate, whose members’ jobs were directly on the line. Working class communities in the townships and informal settlements - shantytowns - also began to take their fights to the street demanding better services.

The reason for the conflict with the ANC government is that, a few years after its taking over, it was becoming increasingly clear that the “miracle” settlement that saw the “peaceful” transition from apartheid to democracy had been brokered in the form of a deal that protected capital and the capitalist system in exchange for the vote for the majority and other political and social reforms. The ANC leaders, actually from day one of their arrival from exile and jail, were busy whittling down the demands of the people and talking about the unviability of a socialist path. The RDP was a transitional programme from socialist idealism to a pragmatic accommodation to capital. Indeed, it did not last long and the capitalist interest reasserted itself with a vengeance through GEAR with its various attacks on the working class, namely, lay-offs of state employees, sub-contracting, privatisation, etc. The government’s budget prioritised the interests of capital and the commitment to “rolling back the legacy of apartheid” through vigorous “delivery” of services and jobs for all took a backseat. Neoliberal pro-capitalist policies such as the removal of exchange controls and other protectionist measures led to massive capital flight and job losses. The reintegration of the South African economy into capitalist global circuits, after the (relative economic) isolation of the apartheid regime, benefited the capitalist class at the expense of the working class including doing tremendous damage to the developmental prospects of the country bordering on deindustrialisation.

In this guise I became active in the international “anti-globalisation” movement becoming a regular attendee of the World Social Forum and active in the African Social Forum. The decline in the power of this movement saw many movements that emerged at that time implode including the Anti-Privatisation Forum.

In the early 2000s South Africa had active radical groups, community protests, civil society organisations that in different ways were trying to challenge the governments and its commitment to neoliberalism. Can you describe some of these movements you were involved in building and the experience during this time?

As the penny began to drop various communities took to the streets in protest challenging policies that threatened their access to services such as the user-must-pay policy, penalisation and criminalisation of those who could not afford these paid-for-services, installation of pre-paid water meters, reduction of electricity amperage to the poor, etc. In Johannesburg the union SAMWU combined with students fighting against privatisation at Wits University and communities to form a fighting front against the privatisation programme of the Johannesburg City Council. This front later became the Anti-Privatisation Forum in which I was the organiser. In Soweto we formed the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee fighting against power cut-offs to force residents to pay the suddenly exorbitant bills. This organisation soon took up the struggle against the installation of water meters.

In Durban, the Concerned Citizens Forum was formed and led by Fatima Meer and Ashwin Desai, among others, organising in Chatsworth, a working class "Indian" area, the apartheid geography, against services payment enforcement by the municipality. The Landless Peoples Movement was formed to fight against land evictions in the rural areas, the Anti-Eviction Campaign fought against this in Cape Town. The Treatment Action Campaign fought for the provision of medication for people living with HIV/AIDS in the face of a president of the country, Thabo Mbeki, who flatly denied the very existence of the virus, no doubt trying to shirk responsibility due to fiscal considerations. Meanwhile, the trade unions, the SACP and ANC were blowing hot and cold in the face of the emergence of these grievances, struggles and movements. The ANC-SACP-COSATU Alliance was used to containing struggle and isolating loyalists from contamination by this spirit of struggle.

When Zuma was elected to the head of the ANC and then in elections in 2009, there was some hope that he would speak more readily for the poor. This obviously hasn't happened. How would you characterise the years of his presidency? Though much has been made of his blunders, he has also been careful to develop a rural support base.

ANC, SACP and COSATU members, including those of the South African National Civic Organisation, a fourth member of the tripartite alliance, suffered as much as everyone else from the anti-working class policies of the government, especially those on the ground. Soon the rumblings could not be contained and the leadership especially of the SACP, which controls COSATU, in unprincipled ways sought to put the blame on Thabo Mbeki's head in an internal power struggle. A closer look shows that the whole Mbeki-Zuma debacle which saw Zuma win at the Polokwane national conference in 2007 served two political purposes. The first one was the internal power struggle itself, the jostling inside the party for ascendancy. The second one was a deeper process of hegemony consolidation, namely, aligning the party organisation to the party inside the state. In practice the two were closely interrelated but must be separated for analysis.

Mbeki was blamed for the "1996 class project" which was said to be the neoliberal prioritisation of bosses interests over those of the workers. In this way the opportunistic ANC-SACP-COSATU leaders used the internal struggle for power as a lightning rod to channel the real anger of the working class, including organised labour, for the socioeconomic reversals experienced under an ANC government of liberation. Zuma was falsely painted as a people's leader and champion of the working class. Mbeki was painted as aloof, intellectualist and serving bosses and imperialist interests. Zuma sang his way to winning the presidency of the ANC with his trademark struggle song "Mshini wami" which means "my machine gun." I was there at the COSATU congress in 2007 when Zuma was presented to the delegates as a born socialist whose mother had been a domestic worker. Mbeki lost the election and later was recalled from being country's president before his term ended.

The fact that the ANC went straight from jail and exile into the corridors of power created a misalignment between the ANC as government and as movement. The ANC in the party branch and in the street had to be brought into line with the ANC in government. This is why one of the war cries against Mbeki and for Zuma during the power struggle was that Mbeki was not listening to the

branches as if there were two ANC's. During Zuma's rape trial ANC supporters took to the streets something that had not been seen in South Africa for a long time. Zuma then symbolised the unification of the two ANC's: as government and as movement. Once this unity was achieved it was possible for the ANC to speak with one voice. Unfortunately that voice is the voice of big capital and not of the working class. Zuma defaulted on all the promises that had been made to the working class on his behalf by the ANC, SACP and COSATU leaders. That is why soon afterwards radicals like Julius Malema, Zwelinzima Vavi and Irvin Jim, respectively the leaders of the ANC Youth League, of COSATU and of NUMSA, found themselves out in the cold. They were under pressure from their constituencies whose expectations had been raised by the Zuma campaign in which they had personally made some bombastic claims. Indeed, the chickens came home to roost and Julius Malema was expelled from the ANC and went on to form the Economic Freedom Fighters. Jim led NUMSA in its break with the tripartite alliance. And Zwelinzima Vavi was expelled as general secretary of COSATU in 2015 for opposing the subsequent expulsion of NUMSA from COSATU. All three leaders became increasingly and irreconcilably critical of the ANC government's pro-capitalist policies. This has opened a new era in South African working class politics.

During the 2000s there have been efforts to develop a left alternative, out of a range of different groups. Currently the Democratic Left Front (DLF) is one such effort. How successful have these been? What are the challenges for a radical left?

I am the national secretary of the Democratic Left Front (DLF). This is an organisation that was formed five years ago in an attempt to regroup the left. Vishwas Satgar, an ex-SACP leader who was expelled by the party, was at the forefront of the initiative. At the time there was a feeling that the social movements and community organisations behind the numerous protests in South Africa were not addressing the question of power and a left alternative to bourgeois rule. The DLF was launched with the participation of both left groups and community organisations on an anti-capitalist platform. It has evolved into a pro-socialist stance and is supportive of the call by NUMSA to build a workers' party. It also participates in the United Front, another structure spearheaded in the course of what is called here the "NUMSA moment." The UF unites labour, community and student/youth struggles on an anti-capitalist platform. It is starting off somewhat similar to how the DLF started but it has the muscle of NUMSA behind it. The DLF is fully behind NUMSA in its attempt to build a new left pole in South Africa including the plans to launch a new trade union federation and the Movement for Socialism initiative.

The attempt at left regroupment by the DLF has been a difficult one and is currently yielding mixed results. The challenge, in my opinion, has been getting around the demobilisation and demoralisation of the working class and of the left. The vision of a different society has been systematically trampled upon for so long and this has resulted in a loss of hope that a different future is possible and that workers by themselves can lead the struggle towards that future. There can be no socialism without working class leadership. Without knowledge of and belief in the organic capacity of the working class to effect social change, that is, the self-activity for self-emancipation, the struggle begins to lose direction. Militancy without class politics gives an illusion of movement but in reality little change takes place. The DLF was formed in a context of militant struggles in working class communities and in the workplaces but the political turmoil did not seem to have a centre of authority. There was certainly little overt connection between the various struggles taking place. There seemed to be no shared vision.

The DLF was formed upon an anti-capitalist platform in a search for alternatives. It soon became apparent that being anti-capitalist is not enough, we also needed to be pro-socialist. This move created some tensions and dissension inside the organisation because initially there had been an emphasis on pluralism, in other words, accommodating different political traditions and tendencies in the DLF. Some comrades felt that an aspect of this pluralism was being lost by this political-

ideological development of the organisation. Another problem has been a fundamental one, namely, to what extent the DLF could regard itself as a front in the light of the absence of mass organisations in its membership. There is only one trade union affiliate of the DLF. Some comrades felt it was more realistic to regard it as a solidarity forum whose work was to support struggles while raising the flag of socialism, of an alternative.

At the moment the DLF continues its work in a radically changed political terrain containing many possibilities and challenges. The DLF worked hard to support the strikes in the platinum mines including during the Lonmin strike that resulted in the Marikana Massacre in 2012. Some of the DLF's leading members helped form the Marikana Support Campaign which is fighting for justice for the slain miners. A documentary, *Miners Shot Down*, was put together by a leading member of the DLF, Rehad Desai, and this contributed to raising awareness about what actually happened on that mountain on 16 August 2012 when 34 miners were shot dead by the state police. The DLF formed a strike support committee during the four-month long industry-wide strike in the platinum mines in South Africa in early 2014. The committee organised political and material support to the striking miners including food and clothing collections and a massive feeding operation that involved the churches, community organisations and Gift of the Givers, the non-partisan disaster relief organisation. The message was spread abroad and a solidarity fund was set up and benefited from international support. Most recently, the DLF has supported the student and worker uprisings in the universities that took place in October 2015. The students and workers were demanding the pulling down of Cecil Rhodes's statue at the University of Cape Town, scrapping of a proposed tuition fee increase and an end to outsourcing of cleaning, security and other services because it adversely affected workers.

The massacre of workers at Marikana in 2012 is regarded as a fork in the road for the ANC, the Alliance and the working class. Can you tell us how you see this moment, what it means, exposes and how this has played out?

The Marikana Massacre was a very painful moment in the struggle for liberation of the workers here. Everyone was stunned when the police opened fire on the miners on strike. No one expected a government of liberation to do that. All illusions in the class character of the South African state, run by the ANC, were dispelled. The ANC government was there to protect capital and profits and was prepared to shed blood doing so. This shook the architecture of class collaboration that housed the South African state to its foundations, namely, the ANC-SACP-COSATU Alliance. The first casualty was the National Union of Mineworkers, then the biggest trade union affiliate of COSATU and biggest supporter and ally of the ANC: all its general secretaries became secretaries general of the ANC political party (Cyril Ramaphosa, Kgalema Motlanthe and Gwede Mantashe). The massacre led to the NUM losing thousands of its members to a new union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). The workers left the NUM because it did not support their strike and because they saw it as "eating with the bosses."

The Marikana Massacre brought attention to the power of the working class. The workers at Lonmin, where the strike happened, organised themselves and went on strike against the wishes of their union, the NUM, and against a government of national liberation and its laws. They ignored the Labour Relations Act which governs industrial conflict; they did not declare a dispute or apply for a strike certificate, they just struck. They demanded R12, 500 [£600] a month which for many meant a four-fold increase in wages. In other words, their demands were based on their needs and not on what the bosses were prepared to give. They formed a workers' strike committee to lead the strike which was directly accountable to the strikers' assembly. And after 34 of their comrades lay dead shot by the police, they continued with their strike for another three weeks until they won substantial increases from the company.

A spectre was born which was to haunt the South African ruling class, this is the “Spirit of Marikana.” The spirit of defiance, of do-or-die, of moving forward against all odds. This is what the workers on that mountain displayed. This is what millions of workers saw. The workers were ready to lose their lives rather than continue being exploited by the mine owners. Certainly they were prepared to lose their jobs in the process. Later a worker who was shot nine times and survived, Mzoxolo Magidiwana, said that they were fighting to make sure that their children did not suffer as they did. A few months later the same workers who joined tens of thousands of other workers from other platinum-mining companies to wage a four-month long strike demanding R12 500. The strike was long and hard but the workers vowed never to call off the strike because doing so would be a betrayal of the spirit of the dead miners on that mountain. The “Spirit of Marikana” strengthened their resolve and they eventually won a significant wage increase.

At about the same time, in 2012, a sector of some of the most oppressed and exploited workers in South Africa, the farmworkers, broke out in struggle demanding a living wage. This struggle took place mostly in the Western Cape’s winelands where wages and working conditions render workers to be no better than modern slaves. The farmworkers also did not follow any procedures, they simply took action. Police brutality and state repression of the strike was the order of the day. A union which did its best to support the workers who, like the miners, struck without their unions, the CSAAWU (the Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union), is still facing closure today after being slapped with a million-rand damages claim by the bosses for its involvement in the strike. Despite the attacks from the state and capital, the farmworkers won a significant wage increase.

The “Spirit of Marikana” drifted around and affected the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), now the biggest union in the country with 370 000 members. The so-called “NUMSA moment” was born when the union decided to break out of the ANC-SACP-COSATU Alliance in a special national congress in 2014. Delegates watched the documentary, *Miners Shot Down*, and listened to some widows of the slain miners speak. Afterwards they broke into song and individually and in groups, many in tears, went to the front with money in their hands donating over R100 000 to the dead miners’ solidarity fund. Later they resolved not to vote for the ANC and to form a worker’s party and fight for workers power and socialism.

Working class communities were also touched by the “Spirit of Marikana.” The housing crisis and the unresolved land question in South Africa saw four settlements being set-up in different parts of the country by way of land invasions and housing occupations. These takeovers were just some among many but what is significant with these four is that they named their settlements “Marikana.” They took over the land with the spirit of do-or-die: “Let the state kill us as they did in Marikana but we are not moving from this piece of ground.” These new Marikanas are in Cato Crest, Durban; Philippi, Cape Town; Mzimhlophe, Soweto and Tlokwe, Potchefstroom.

The student and worker rebellion in the universities in late 2015 have also been infected by the “Spirit of Marikana.” The students took to the street without seeking permission from the authorities as required by the Public Gatherings Act. They marched, blocked roads, boycotted classes, and generally disrupted university operations forcing the authorities to listen to and eventually to accede to some of their demands. Workers, especially cleaners, went on strike in several campuses without acquiring a strike certificate. The student marches to parliament in Cape Town and to the seat of government in Pretoria in October 2015 happened because the students wanted it, not because the authorities agreed to it. They sought permission from no one, the permission came from the strength of their mobilisation. The victories of the workers and students, the workers won an in-principle agreement in most of the universities that outsourcing would end, and the students won their zero percent increase. It was the unity of workers and students and the power of disruption that won the victories.

A recent month-long strike from March this year by municipal workers who collect garbage in the city and clean the streets has also shown aspects of the new mood among workers in the country. These workers, mostly against the wishes of their union, the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), and without following strike procedures, have been on a militant strike that has included trashing the streets, that is, throwing rubbish all over town to press forward their demands. The garbage piled up in Johannesburg until the city relented and an agreement was signed with the workers winning some concessions including a no victimisation clause after the hysteria of the middle classes against the trashing of the city and accusations of strike violence directed at scabs. The weapon of the workers was again disruption of business as usual and forcing the authorities to accede to their demands.

I would say that the "NUMSA moment" has recently disappointed many people who were hoping for a stronger and bolder way forward. There is a feeling that despite the radical left turn taken by the NUMSA leadership, it will take time for them to shake off the baggage of SACP politics and habits including a top-down approach to struggle and weak belief in the organic capacity of the working class to lead its own struggle to socialism. There is also the reality that none of the COSATU unions actually left the union federation after the expulsion of NUMSA and later of Zwelinzima Vavi, the COSATU general secretary, the latter for opposing NUMSA's expulsion. The nine unions that sympathised with NUMSA have not taken any visible action in support. Hope now lies on NUMSA and Vavi's plans to launch a new union federation later this year.

The actions on the ground by workers and communities, in my assessment, are the ones that are giving new life to the flagging NUMSA moment. Workers are leading the way showing that to win you need to fight based on your needs not on what the bosses are willing to give. You need to fight with weapons that you choose and that are readily available to all workers and not those chosen by your enemy - you have to fight because you are ready to and not because the enemy has given you permission to do so. You have to disrupt operations and stop the enemy's business as usual. Solidarity in struggle is the heart of the workers movement. These are lessons that many trade union, political and community leaders can learn from; the struggles mentioned here and which they appear to have forgotten during their long, cosy residence inside the ANC-SACP-COSATU edifice of class collaboration.

Recently, in 2015 there was an extraordinary uprising of students demanding both bread and butter reforms and the removal of symbols of privilege and the racist, settler past of South Africa. Much of the language in this movement has spoken of the need for black empowerment, black consciousness, rather than of class and socialism. How do you see the development of this movement?

The student movement is very important because the youth are the future. However, the only future is a workers future. What is important about the student movement is that it began as an ideological critique of the legacy of colonialism, capitalism, racism and patriarchy in the universities, in particular as symbolised by the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. But it soon transposed into a movement against the increase in tuition fees and even against paying for education. From very early on, it united with and took on board the struggles of the workers against outsourcing. This was remarkable and partly a result of many long years of struggle by university workers, especially cleaning and security, against the hardships of outsourcing. The heightened racial consciousness among militant students, most of whom were black, led them to see the workers as black like themselves, indeed as their mothers and fathers. This showed the interrelationship between race, class and gender in the struggle for emancipation. Many cleaning workers are women and the students found this significant. The student movement rescued Black Consciousness and Pan-Africanism from the history books into living systems of thought relevant for day to day struggle.

An important theoretical and ideological theme in the student movement is decolonisation. There is an ideological ferment and militant dynamism in South African universities that centres around this idea. It is a powerful and radical idea that goes beyond surface appearance and the usual terms in which we talk about society. The students are talking about the need to change the very structure of society. Not to change certain parts or aspects, but to change society totally. Race is central to this vision. It is an inspired vision because ideologically it represents a total negation: the negation of the negation. It is an idea that says no to everything existing. The radical students are saying everything is wrong about this society. The education system is wrong, it must change. The suffering of cleaning workers is wrong. White power, white supremacy and white monopoly capital are all wrong. The racism, sexism, all of it. Black pain: there has been too much suffering, we can't take it anymore, it must all come to an end. We cannot continue this way, it must all stop.

Practically it can lead to militant action. We cannot allow so-called normality to prevail. Nothing is normal in this situation and in the way society is run. Let us disrupt everything because it is all wrong. The garbage workers trash the city saying: "let it be all dirty, let the rubbish pile up because when it looks clean it is actually hiding a lot of dirt that exist underneath -the corruption of the municipal officers, the exploitation of the workers, the daily pain and suffering." Students disrupt lectures and student registration processes on the same grounds: these lectures and these processes exclude the majority from higher education, we must not allow them to continue, they must be disrupted.

This total rejection may lead one to ask: what are you going to do if we change everything? The answer is that we don't know, all we know is that things cannot continue this way. Everything must change. This approach lays the seeds of a new society. It begins with the condemnation of all that exists in order to clear the ground for the new. From this point of view, the decolonization movement is a revolutionary movement.

The movement has won workers important concessions in their struggle against outsourcing. In principle agreements and commitments have been made by the university authorities which means that there will be struggles ahead to ensure that these are met and in ways that benefit rather than penalize workers. It is the same with the student victory where the freeze in fee increase still means that higher education must be paid for and already university administrators are implementing austerity programmes on the grounds that there is less money available. The strength of the movement will lie in keeping the connection and solidarity alive between student and worker struggles.

The difference between the June 16 1976 student uprising and this one is that the first happened in working class high schools while the 2015 uprising took place in middle class universities. Universities are factories that manufacture and vindicate class privilege and inequalities. To avoid elitism the slogan: "Free education from crèche to university" is the correct one. It is also important for the university struggles to connect with other struggles in all spheres of working class life. The commodification of higher education is not the only commodification taking place in the world. There is commodification of food, water, electricity, housing, healthcare, transport, recreation, culture, etc. The student movement cannot move forward without embracing and being embraced by other working class and popular struggles in society.

The ideological shortcomings of Black Consciousness and decolonization must be faced squarely. The emphasis on race, unless qualified by a rigorous class analysis, can lead to identity essentialism. The idea that black is good and suffers while white is bad and is privileged is a counterproductive oversimplification which unfortunately is rife in the South African movement. For example, the Rhodes Must Fall meetings in the University of Cape Town are racially segregated with white students not allowed in. But the danger can be much bigger. There appears to be a marriage of

black separatist nationalist ideas and the more extreme or crude ideas in post-colonial theory. For example, there is talk that Marxism must be rejected because it originates from Europe and Marx was a white man. Some versions of post-colonial theory reject Eurocentrism, modernity and the Enlightenment on the ground of complicity in historical crimes, namely, racism, slavery, colonialism, etc. European theoretical categories are said to adorn the imperialist garments of universalism, that is, claiming universal applications to the whole world, a world that is different and cannot be understood in Eurocentric terms. Vivek Chibber wrote a book in 2013 where he shows the shortcomings of subaltern studies, an important strand within post-colonial theory. This problem has to be addressed by Marxist scholars in South Africa too because in practice and in the long term it represents a retreat from class analysis and the class struggle. It opens the door to middle class leadership of the struggle and can severely weaken the movement going forward.

On the left, a new organisation, the Economic Freedom Fighters, has emerged and now seems to occupy a prominent role in opposition - speaking powerfully to the anger and injustice of contemporary South Africa. How do you see the role of the EFF and how should the radical left respond?

The Economic Freedom Fighters grabbed the imagination of the youth and sections of the working class because they speak loudly and in a straightforward way about power, wealth and struggle. They talk about how the black working class needs to take power. They talk about the need to take back the wealth, to nationalise the farms, mines, factories and banks. Nationalisation figured prominently in the platform they adopted during the 2014 national election and which won them a million votes. They are a welcome development in South African politics in the manner in which they are rattling the cage to the left of the ANC and SACP. They are also youthful and their political method includes taking to the streets to push forward their agenda. They certainly revived public interest in what goes on in the South African parliament. The overwhelming majority of the ANC in that parliament had turned it into one huge sleepy rubber stamp for neoliberal policies and occasional left posturing. The EFF has also taken its struggle into the universities running candidates in Student Representative Councils (SRC) which so far have been dominated by ANC-aligned student organisations notably the South African Students Congress and the Progressive Youth Alliance who all seem to take their orders from Luthuli House, the ANC headquarters in Johannesburg. The “fighters,” as they call themselves, were in the thick of the student uprising against the fee increase even though they did not necessarily lead it. However, they will likely and deservedly benefit handsomely from this involvement in SRC elections in South Africa’s twenty-three universities. This will be the case all the more so because the “independent” or spontaneous leadership of this movement has tended to adopt an autonomist anti-electoral and anti-party political stance. Those who support the movement will find that they can only vote for the EFF if they vote at all.

The strengths and weaknesses of the EFF can be traced to the revival of decolonisation and post-colonial politics and theories, in a word: nationalism. On the one hand Julius Malema’s cry is that the ANC has failed the people, it has not implemented the Freedom Charter, a document that guided the struggle for decades and which, among other things, called for the nationalisation of the “commanding heights of the economy.” This is a call for the completion of the so-called National Democratic Revolution, a theoretical and programmatic formulation of the SACP. Its essence is the two-stage theory of revolution. I think it is fair to say that historically this approach is Stalinist-inspired. The EFF’s official ideology is Marxism-Leninism-Fanonism. The question is whether, in practice, this will be a combination of the best or the worst of these ideologies. The nationalist inflection of the EFF’s discourse finds fertile ground in the people’s disappointment with national liberation and as such is powerful as a mobilising tool. However, the downside is locking the class struggle again into the nationalist cage, a repeat of the dangers that Kwame Nkrumah, with his

concept of “neo-colonialism”, and Frantz Fanon with his “false decolonization”, tried to avoid and failed.

Fanon somewhere quotes Marx on how the social revolution “cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.” The EFF, the student movement and the working class movement has to find a way forward without going back to nationalism as an ideology of struggle. The struggle against imperialism has to break out of the discourse of colonialism without denying this history and its legacy. It has to relook at some of the theoretical categories associated with this struggle in the course of the 20th century and identify and remove the shibboleths that bogged it down and ensured its defeat or partial victories when so much could have been won. One of these theoretical legacies is that of Stalinism. Careful and systematic theoretical work is still necessary to map out the strongest way forward. And at its heart will be proletarian internationalism rather than bourgeois nationalism.

Left reformism takes the struggle forward but is not the way forward. We saw in Greece how the parliamentary road to socialism, in the form of the road to national economic sovereignty, is bound to lead to a dead-end. Revolutionary rhetoric is not the same as a revolutionary programme. It can be a short-cut that inspires in the short-term but demoralises in the long term. The only way forward for the working class and the revolutionary left is the road of struggle, of revolutionary struggle, of the struggle to replace the capitalist system with the socialist system. Under conditions of global capitalist crisis the system is increasingly unable to yield any concessions. This means we are entering an era of struggle. It will take many different forms in different places. Our job as revolutionary socialists, wherever we are located, in the unions, universities, communities, youth organisations, political parties and social movements, is to orient these struggles towards the revolutionary overturn of the capitalist system and the taking of political and economic power by the working class and its allies.

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