

Whither the social movements ?

Can the social movements and labour find common cause ?

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In a situation of social and political turmoil, the question whither the social movements is critical for the left.

Can they build broader working-class unity ? Can they succeed in uniting workplace and community struggles with a view towards building a mass Left political alternative to the ANC ?

Organisations such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), Treatment Action Committee (TAC), Abahlali baseMjondolo, Landless Peoples Movement, Jubilee, Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and others are labelled the ‘new social movements’.

These organisations dramatically entered the historical stage in the first mass struggles of the post-apartheid period. They were at their best during the 25 000-strong march from Alexandra to Sandton during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, partly exposing the contradictions of post-apartheid society that enriched the bosses and impoverished the poor under a government of national liberation.

They also made their presence felt during the World Conference against Racism (WCAR). The big marches signalled great political potential and gave hope to many. Alas, that appearance of unity, coordination and strong historical purpose has disappeared.

Many organisations have become shadows of their former selves. Some have collapsed, some are riven by internal division, and others are permanently redefining their historical purpose. The recent uprisings and riots in the townships and shack settlements have mostly happened with minimal intervention by the new social movements.

A characteristic weakness of the social movements now and in the past has been their isolation from the labour movement. Most are not fully convinced of the need to cooperate in the rebuilding of a united working-class movement across the different sections and organisations of struggle.

The SACP and COSATU leadership’s hostility to the social movements appears to be dampening somewhat these days, but several years ago it frustrated attempts to unite workplace and community struggles. The social movements are also to blame for this. Whether they adopt a vehement anti-ANC stance or want to keep on the right side of the ANC government, or simply avoid the question, these movements either refuse to see the need for a mass left political alternative, or won’t take action to build one.

Instead, some social movement intellectuals have in the past publicised anti-working-class positions, such as theorising that the unions are old hat and that, in fact, COSATU is an enemy of the working class because of the Alliance. Anarcho-autonomism underpins some of this thinking : glorifying local

struggles at the expense of building wider unity, refusing to build organisation systematically, denouncing participation in bourgeois elections on principle, rejecting the party political form and teaching that there is no need to fight for state power. These are disastrous ideas that find a home in some social movements. Instead of seeing the revival of one of the greatest working-class movements in Africa, we see a myriad of mostly small, inward-looking struggles.

Social movements have also set a bad example to the newest struggles. The struggle is not primarily about solidarity. No, it is about 'my issue', 'my problem', indeed, even 'my community', 'my union', but never 'we the united working class, employed and unemployed, young and old, unionised or non-unionised, marching forward together against our common enemy, the capitalists, towards a common, better future'. The failure to build solidarity and coordination across organisations makes it easy for the enemy to isolate and contain struggles.

There is no shortage of issues and struggles in South Africa. What we lack is a vision that can unite these into a force strong enough to decisively change things in favour of the majority. The many struggles, strikes, uprisings and riots together constitute a movement, but it is a movement with no particular direction ; a movement in a vacuum.

The social movements must come out of their shell ; they must throw away a politics that makes them centres of their own political universe. They should not fool themselves and think that they are the alternative to the ANC-SACPCOSATU Alliance. To become this, they need to substantially enrich their politics and attract the millions and millions of working-class people suffering under the rule of profit. This should be the mission of the Social Movements Indaba which was born during the anti-WSSD march to unite struggle.

The question of the ANC government cannot be avoided : the ANC is the one leading the attack against the working class and the poor in South Africa. The ANC we once loved and joined and fought and died for is no more. It has been stolen by the bosses. We mourn this ; we do not celebrate. Most of the recent uprisings and riots are against the ANC government. The enemy of the workers during the recent public sector strike is the ANC government. We have to say to the masses : Yes, it is true, we were the ANC, but we are no longer and cannot be the ANC.

So what is the alternative ? The SACP cannot be the alternative to the ANC, because it is a supporter of the ANC. A supporter cannot at the same time be the opposition. COSATU is important, but it is a trade union and not a political party. The existing pro-working-class political parties are not very successful.

This points to the need for a new working-class political party that would organise around an emergency programme that aims to ease the immediate suffering of millions of working class and poor people. In the long term it would fight to take state power in the name of the working class on a socialist programme. This is the only way to 'roll back the capitalist agenda' or fight against the pro-capitalist faction in the ANC government.

The social movements and the trade unions will run around like a mad dog chasing its own tail, unless they confront seriously the question of building a mass workers' party in South Africa. Unity of all struggles and all sections of the working class on an independent Left platform aiming for power is the way out of the social turmoil and political confusion that is gripping the country today.

P.-S.

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* Trevor Ngwane is a former ANC councillor who was expelled for his opposition to privatisation. He

is active in the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee.