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Social Movements: Challenging the State

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Trevor Ngwane

I will start with a story – something which happened on Monday. I was fortunate to be there, in Soweto in White City, after a four-hour meeting, where people were expressing their frustration with the installation of pre-paid water meters, in their township – White City, Jabavu is one of the older areas in Soweto and has a very proud tradition of struggle. So, after a four-hour meeting, with residents expressing their frustration, for example saying things like “the government, through its HIV/AIDS home-care based theme, wants us to take care of the sick people with HIV/AIDS – we must wash them, they soil themselves and we must wash the blankets – where are we going to get the water to take care of these people. We’re unemployed, we are poor, where will we get money to buy water with a card?” And then the complaints changed to accusations – “Under apartheid, we had no problem with water, even the Boers never tampered with our water – Thabo Mbeki, you must leave our water alone – you have your priorities wrong, start with unemployment.” Then the tenor got quite accusatory as the people started to remind themselves and each other about their struggle and how much they had sacrificed; especially White City – I was lucky, I used to live there and people did fight there, maybe more than other areas in Soweto. So they said “how can this government who we fought so hard to put into power, do this to us?” As the temper and the anger rose up, people then decided to take matters into their own hands and decided now they were going to move those pre-paid meters. They all marched and removed about 30 or 40 installations around the area.

The point here is that, social movements – and it’s a good thing that it happened in White City so I can illustrate my point – represents a resurgence, a renewal, of struggle. That struggle never stopped, it never died – we might talk of a lull, a demobilisation, which is my main point, but I think the struggle of the working class never stops because the struggle of the working class is found in the daily lives of ordinary people.

When you wake up as a worker – when I say worker, I mean employed and unemployed – you have to worry, what am I going to eat; I must now send my kids to school, do they have a lunch box; have I paid the school fees; did I have enough soap yesterday to wash my kids socks? So it

is a struggle, it's there. It's not created by the social movements, it was never created by the ANC or the Communist Party or anyone – it's there because of the daily grind of life under capitalism. If you're a worker under capitalism, you have to struggle. And in fact, my argument is that that struggle to survive is a form of resistance, in fact is the basic resistance by the working class under capitalism to survive because the capitalists and their system – they impose many things on their workers: they impose poverty, you don't know what to eat; they impose disease, you're sick because you live in a shack, many of my friends who live in shacks, I've noticed always have a cold and they're always coughing; they impose pain, it's not nice to send your kid to school on an empty stomach; sometimes they impose death.

So when you struggle for survival, you resist that, you're fighting against that and of course it might be individualised or be encapsulated within the context of a family or a small social unit but it is the struggle. It is the foundation of our struggle as organisations, as social movements, as trade unions, as political parties and so on.

The problem today is that when people look back in history, we all know that those who are victorious in history, re-write history. So people make grand claims: "We liberated you," "if it was not for us, you would not be free," "we manufactured and created the struggle." This is not true. Then today we have an opposite problem where people say, people like us – social movements – "we renewed the struggle, we took over where the ANC sold out and created a new struggle." The point here is that by making those claims, we lose sight of the real movement of the working class which is based on the daily suffering of ordinary people – grannies in Soweto and Gugulethu, aunties whose children have got HIV/AIDS and have just been retrenched, workers who have lost their jobs, youth who have no future because they don't have money to go to university and they have no hope of a job.

Now to go back to the White City story – I noticed something about the meeting. As I said, it first started off as complaints. The meeting was called by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SCC) which organises in Soweto and started as a campaign against electricity and then started dealing with housing and other problems, recently with the problem of water. Now, the SCC is affiliated with the Anti-Privatization Forum which has got about 20 affiliates. Now, the SCC called the meeting because White City residents approached it and said they have a problem - they are installing pre-paid water meters. And so a meeting was called. Now, after a year of fighting against the installation of pre-paid water meters we've learnt a few lessons. For example, my job in this meeting – I never spoke – was to make sure that our comrades, our trade activists, our experienced activists, don't dominate the meeting. So we made sure that even though the locals are new to our struggle – the chair of the meeting was a local guy and the 5 main speakers were local people – our comrades spoke by raising their hands and trying to map out the issues to show the links.

But, without being prompted, the meeting moved from complaints and moans to say, “hey, this government was put there by us.” Then the fear – because I saw that there was a give and take between fear and hope, the fear of a life without water – “what am I going to do without water, how will I wash my sick child without water” – that fear was buried in a hope and they remembered that actually this government was put into power by ourselves, by our struggle and they remembered that when they fought against apartheid they were facing the apartheid state – there is no way the ANC government, yes I’ve got pamphlets here about state repression, but they haven’t reached that level of killing us, assassinations. It was tough, those days, you were detained and so on. Those people in White City, they faced that state repression because they had a hope that it was possible to build a different future, a future for themselves and their kids. So, it was that hope which buried the fear of not having water. There was a police car driving around, circling the meeting all the time. But the fear of the police state was buried by the hope that it is possible that we, White City residents, myself and my neighbour right here, we can do something to stop these pre-paid water meters and we can do something to secure our right to water.

So, I noticed that interesting give and take between fear and hope and that is really what I want to talk about. I want to say that, what the ANC government has done, and the bosses they serve, is to steal and take away the hope of a better life for all people, in particular the working class. Of course, their slogan is “a better life for all” but their policies – let’s take water – their policies are that there is nothing for free. If you want something, if you want water, you must pay for it. And moreover they say – because you know they are operating from a capitalist agenda – they say, when we provide you with water or with anything for that matter, the capitalist must get their rand, they must make their profit. This is the big crime I accuse the ANC of.

There was a time when we marched, when those grannies of White City could face bullets, tanks because they had that hope that one day there could be water for all, houses for all. But that hope has been systematically undermined and stolen and denied. Now there is water for those who can pay. There is health care for those who can pay. There are houses for those who can go to the bank and secure a bank loan. These days, even an RDP house has to have a deposit. So the ANC government has stolen that hope that there can be something for all of us. Because if we have to pay, the granny in Soweto knows that she hasn’t got the money to pay so she won’t get it. The unemployed knows that maybe those who are employed will get it but I’m unemployed so I can’t get it. Even with jobs, the ANC government has unveiled a grand plan – we’re going to halve unemployment by 2015. That is supposed to give hope but it actually conveys that for me, unemployed in Soweto, perhaps I won’t be among the lucky half who gets the jobs. Then what happens – that hope that one day we can have something for all of us. And if there is something for all of us, there must be something for me to.

These days is a lotto mentality - I must win, they must lose, so I can win. Now, in Cape Town there is a big problem because now the Freedom Charter celebration is coming, on June 27, so the ANC government must build houses quickly because those people in Cape Town still live in shacks, they still have the bucket system, it's not only the Free State. Now they are going to build houses but they are only going to build 3000 houses and there are 15000 families and moreover those houses are for people in Orlando East, in Pimville and so on.

So what are the people in Cape Town saying, the Cape Town concerned residents? The people are saying "no, Orlando East must not get those houses, Pimville must not get those houses, these houses are in Cape Town, these are our houses." So that vision, that dream, of houses for all, had been replaced. People used to move forward demanding decent houses, now they are moving backwards saying he or she must not get the house. This is the tragedy and the crime of the ANC government – stealing our hope, stealing our dream.

Now, because local government elections are coming, when in the last election it's true that millions voted for the ANC, the ANC is preparing to actually win the local government elections and turn around and say, "see, they must like pre-paid water meters – they voted for us."

In any case, I want to identify a problem with the social movements or with our analysis. Many people voted for the ANC but many stayed at home and didn't bother to vote. Now some of us celebrated that because it shows that people are disillusioned but I have a fear that those people that didn't vote, not all of them, but maybe the majority, lost hope in the ANC and they also lost hope in the power of the vote to change things for the better. But maybe they also lost hope in politics, they lost hope in organization, they lost hope in political parties. In fact they lost hope in a better future, they lost hope in their own power to change things. I don't think this is something we should celebrate, I think this is something we should actually moan about.

Now we all know that in the USA, 30% of registered voters actually make their mark. I think the ANC is moving towards that mode, where it doesn't matter for them that the millions and millions must live in despair, as long as, when election day is near, they can drive them into a frenzy and get enough votes to make it. In fact, I've got something here called "Mbeki's Gamble." Now Trevor Manuel, the finance minister said something, which really hurt me – and this was reported in the newspapers – he said "those who say unemployment rate is at 41% must be wrong because if it was at 41%, there would be a revolution." That's what he said. Now, I was thinking, this is actually Thabo Mbeki's gamble, because he's calculating how much hardship can I visit on the working class before they say enough is enough and revolt? How many people must lose their jobs, how many youth must sit at home without any hope of getting a higher education, of getting a job until they say enough is enough and we are sick of the system? How many must live in shacks and wake up every morning in a shack, washing in a small dish before they say enough is enough? I think it is at that point that Thabo Mbeki's social democratic aspirations are

revived and then he changes things. Because revolution is about confidence in your own power. Now revolution is about the masses taking matters into their own hands, like those White City residents - like Trotsky said, it's when the masses interfere with history, when they interfere with the plans of the ruling class. Now revolution is only possible when the masses have that hope and that confidence and when people have hope for the future. I think what actually Trevor Manuel is saying, he's saying to the bosses "relax, don't worry, we've stolen all the hope, we've stolen all the confidence, we've demobilised them so there won't be any revolution."

So, my main point here, which I would like to conclude on, is that our job, as social movements, is to deal with that legacy of demobilisation. It didn't just happen, Joe Slovo was already saying "strikes are wrong, strikes attack the economy, strikes attack reconciliation." Joe Slovo was already saying, we all knew that the capitalists are our enemy, the capitalists are our social partners, the capitalists are the ones who cause unemployment and who retrench us. Joe Slovo, the communist party, the ANC – today it is the other way around – the problem of unemployment can all be solved with the help of the capitalists. So this is how they have stolen our hope and they have demobilised our struggle.

Our job is to restore the confidence of the masses in their own power. To make them do what those residents of White City did without prompting – provide a platform for them to bring out their frustrations, to remember what happened in the past. Sometimes social movements are to quick to attack – unions are bureaucratic, but there was a time when the unions were part of the movement against apartheid, against capitalism. We shouldn't be too fast to claim the struggle because they belong to the working class. If the social movements can do that, I think we can go a long way to doing what Trevor Manuel fears the most – a revolution.