

Has we failed the Party? The crisis of capitalism and the challenge of building socialism in South Africa: the responsibility of socialists.

## 1. Introduction

What if Marxists don't actually have all the answers? What if our understanding of the world, society, history and capitalism are naïve and simplistic? What would this mean for South African Marxists? This possibility does not detract from the desirability of socialism, but it does suggest that we exercise some restraint and humility when suggesting the way forward to achieving our goal of socialism. The moral basis of socialism is not on trial, but the practical application of Marxism is. We should have a longer view of history. After all, socialism has only been articulated in the last 150 years, capitalism has dominated development for over 3000.

Joe Slovo, after the collapse of authoritarian socialism in the USSR and its proxy states, led the charge in the necessary debate that was taking place by asking the question, "Has Socialism Failed?". He came to the honest conclusion that the SACP and its leaders and cadres had, along with the various communist and workers parties that led these regimes, failed socialism. By not criticising the practices of the authoritarian socialist regimes and the parties that led them, the SACP and its cadres were complicit, if not in their various crimes and perversions of socialism, at least in being apologists for them. He urged that socialists debate the mistakes of the past with a view to strengthening the socialist revolution. A robust debate followed in our country. It took place under exciting conditions; the mass-driven, final push for democracy, negotiations with the apartheid regime and then, under a new democratic dispensation. After the assassination of Comrade Chris Hani, the Party slipped into the doldrums. It then seemed to briefly come back to life for a while, with exciting campaigns, a simple, radical critique of the transition and even the beginnings of a new vision for the future. Sadly, after this brief "Prague" spring, the socialist revolution in our country is once again in a crisis. This time, the makings of the crisis are radically different. Unlike the authoritarian socialist regimes that were collapsed by their own people, the socialist revolution here is foundering during a period of democracy and freedom unprecedented for many socialist parties. Socialists occupy positions in government, the state, trade unions, CBOs and NGOs. There are even socialists in business! Perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves is, given these conditions, why has the socialist revolution not succeeded?

## 2. Why socialism?

There are many people who during this period of capitalist triumphalism proclaim the irrelevance or the failure of socialism. We live in a country and in a world in which the majority of people are poor. In some cases this poverty is relative, measured in relation to the wealth accumulated by the privileged few. In other cases, this poverty is absolute, with such people abandoned to a miserable existence as bleak and as 'nasty, brutish and short' as anything Dickens or Hobbes ever wrote about. The opulent lifestyle many of us take for granted is the direct cause of the environmental challenges that our planet faces. Wars in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere have their origins in the greed that capitalism nurtures. Our children stand to inherit all of this; inequality, insecurity, misery, ignorance, disease and premature death. No

reasonable person can deny the crisis of capitalism. For this reasons, among many, socialism is not only desirable, it is essential.

Yet, it helps little to dramatise this crisis, as easy as it is to do so. While children defecate their stomachs out in the desert of the Sudan, the capitalist machine functions efficiently for the owners of capital; be they entrepreneurs, or workers, through their pension funds. While small businesses go bankrupt as multi-national companies flit around the globe, causing job losses for those previously employed, profits increase, the rich get richer and the poor stay what they have always been, poor; both relatively and absolutely. Our own country experience in the past 13 years bears this reality out. Freedom and democracy have brought disproportionate benefits to the wealthy, the propertied, the educated and those in proximity to political power. It was ever thus.

### 3. Capitalisms response to its own crisis

Despite repeated predictions of imminent socialist revolution, both internationally and domestically, capitalism has proved to be resilient, constantly recreating conditions for the successful accumulation of wealth by the privileged. There is no doubt that capitalism as it exists today; globalised, digitalised and technologically mediated, is a different beast to that so thoroughly critiqued by Karl Marx. This is not to say Marx is no longer relevant. In many respects his critique is only really fully articulated by modern or late capitalism. Yet, it is impossible to deny that as capitalism is more pervasive globally today, it is more difficult to transform or to defeat. In many respects, the crisis of capitalism is only a crisis for the poor. For capital, it is an opportunity. For the well-off, it is a problem in another neighbourhood. This contradiction is one that has been as much part of the NDR as has the Freedom Charter.

We must be honest and admit, that our analysis and program as Marxists globally, and therefor locally, is inadequate. While we can offer a profound description and explanation of the conditions of the working class and the under-classes of the unemployed and those engaged in subsistence or survivalist economic activity, we have been unable to lead these people beyond the point that the ANC has brought them to. Our variant of a developing social democracy has brought relief for many from the vagaries of their existence under apartheid. This is no small feat. The criticism levelled at the ANC in this regard are, for the most part, simply hypocritical. Socialists have been active in the ANC and the Tri-Partite Alliance all along. The whinge that Thabo Mbeki and the rest of the so-called 1996 class project, has through some Machiavellian manouevre stopped them from implementing socialism, is unbelievably telling. It points to the ineffectual nature of those apparently ranged in readiness to lead us in to socialism. It has led many into temptation, for while we wait for socialism, the reality is that we must all live under capitalism.

We must admit that capitalism is the tide that moves us all along. Socialism is the idea that we have an alternative. Important as this idea is, we should not be drawn to voluntarism, opportunism, syndicalism or anarchism because we are frustrated at the lack of progress of the socialist revolution. What we should really do is ask ourselves; what have we done incorrectly? And, what have we not done that we should have?

One of the most interesting features of Marxism today is its estrangement from the physical sciences. Marx, Engels and Lenin all found consolation in the apparent unity between the laws of the physical sciences and those of Marxism. The divergence between these is so apparent today, leading to one of two conclusions; either such unity was manufactured or the contemporary divergence is one of significance.

#### 4. The “mass-negotiated” NDR

South Africa’s revolution, the mass-negotiated transition from apartheid to democracy, has thrown up challenges and contradictions that the very movement that has led this revolution; the ANC and its allies, has found difficult to address. Apart from the obvious ones; balancing land reform against property rights (it was ever thus!), more complex issues have presented themselves before the revolutionary movement. Most significantly, our national democratic revolution came about as a result of a global and domestic conjuncture or nexus that was unique. The collapse of the socialist revolutions of various Eastern European countries and of the attempt by these countries to extend their own revolutions by force of arms on other national states, created a critical moment in the then bi-polar global system. This, together with the political stalemate and simultaneous economic collapse of the apartheid system, created conditions for a relatively peaceful transition. The impact of this context on the socialist program of the communist and socialist forces in the NDR was profound. It created an opportunity to advance to socialism, but it was one that came at a price. It created the conditions for a unique opportunity to build socialism in democratic conditions, but this has been an opportunity that the working class and its allies have yet to fully take advantage of. The reasons for this are complex, but a simplified explanation is that they have been distracted or diverted by our own poverty of theory and our own failure to organise and campaign for socialism.

There is no doubt that had the former USSR and its surrounding proxy states survived, South Africa would look very different today. We would still be free of apartheid, but we would have probably gone through a bloody civil war, resulting in the ultimate victory of the revolutionary forces. There is no telling what damage would have been done to our people, our infrastructure and neighbouring countries had this been our path. There is no guarantee that we would have not had greater repression, and even a fascist balkanised White enclave in part of the territory of South Africa, similar to Israel. Alternately, we could have wound up a state perpetually predisposed to instability, due to the ongoing stalemate of the balance of forces, such as the state of Lebanon.

These scenarios were averted by the ability of the ANC and its allies; the SACP and a progressive trade union movement borne of the forging of worker unity through years of struggle by SACTU and FOSATU, that gave rise to COSATU, to adapt to the new terrain on which the revolution had to take place. This terrain, one in which it was important for the movement to identify certain pressure points and the logical flows of processes as they unfolded, presented an opportunity for the revolutionary forces to perpetually apply pressure on the apartheid regime and the capitalist class to exact certain radical reforms from them. These radical reforms; un-banning the liberation movement, creating the space within which to debate and negotiate the future and ultimately the democratic breakthrough, unfolded on a unique terrain. Unlike previous

colonial struggles before, the oppressor resided permanently in the zone that the revolutionary forces sought to liberate. These forces did not therefore seek to drive the oppressor out, but instead “locked” it in, forcing it on to the terrain most suitable for the working class and the poor; democracy.

It was also a terrain on which the masses played a direct role. The tradition of mass mobilisation, fostered through the years of the ANC led defiance campaigns and boycotts and resuscitated by the UDF after state repression forced these organisations underground, profoundly shaped the democracy we now have. This has created a political culture in which the political leadership take the masses for granted at their own peril. To compensate for the lack of vision and leadership and to quell the desire of the poor for change, as is the case in many revolutions, socialists have substituted populism for the vision, theory and organisational hard work needed to build the momentum for socialism. This is evident from the dreary resolutions and excuses for a socialist program that are now on offer as an apparent alternative to the ANC. Quite how we are to believe that the very members of the ANC who must surely share in the responsibility for the state of our own NDR have something unique to offer, is incomprehensible.

Our world is a very different one today, trite as such a statement may be. It is not necessarily uni-polar, but we have a maverick state in the form of the USA that is able to destabilise us all. We have states such as Russia, that are not quite democratic but are robust national states that have the ability to destabilise the world. We also must contend with a massive authoritarian socialist state in the form of the People’s Republic of China. We have religious movements that exercise an unhealthy influence on politics, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu in their faith.

One of the features of our current reality is the apparent privatisation of society, whether in the form of religion, lifestyle, and the simultaneous organisation of individuals into tendencies that are mass in character yet private or personal at the same time. Liberalism has a unique appeal to the well-off. It is self-evidently true to those who have achieved personal freedom, particularly freedom from want. It inspires others less privileged to break the property boundaries set up by capitalism to protect historical accumulation. Much of the crime we see in our society and more generally has its origins in this alienation.

5. Reform and revolution- The NDR and the Freedom Charter-a home for all, built by the working class and the poor

This terrain, one on which the liberation movement has learnt to advance the NDR through a combination of legal processes and mass mobilisation, is a terrain of its own making. This terrain is to the advantage of the progressive forces. It is one on which the discourse is always “Left”. The Freedom Charter is the hegemonic manifesto of this state. It is institutionalised in the Constitution, our Bill of Rights and much of government policy and legislation.

Progress has been made in achieving the vision of the Freedom Charter, but there is much to be done. For those of us who are socialists and communists in the ANC, our belief is that the Freedom Charter cannot be fully realised under capitalism. We must therefore continue to struggle for socialism. But how we define and struggle for

socialism is crucial if we are to build a society in which freedom, democracy, health and even prosperity are there for all.

There has been an increasing tendency of late for socialists and communists to present a childish, simplistic critique of the terrain on which the NDR takes place and the movement that leads the NDR, as being one in which we can simply announce that we want socialism and that all that stands between the people and socialism is a fraction of the ANC leadership who are now allied to a de-racialised bourgeoisie, the owners of monopoly finance capital. Such an analysis chooses to simply ignore the facts and our history. It is projected in the interests of a few leaders in the movement who seek to portray themselves as “true” revolutionaries over those who have “sold out”. Of course, such claims to revolutionary purity are never actually backed up with any credible evidence, they are simply proclaimed as self-evident truths. Reality and experience show most of these claims to be selfish, far-fetched and dishonest.

## 6. International comparisons

Many revolutions have gone the route of seeking a short-cut to socialism. Under certain conditions, Cuba, China or Vietnam spring to mind, such a short cut was the inevitable consequence of the actions of imperialist forces and of the unity of the people in those countries to advance towards socialism, no matter the conditions. The ultimate success of these projects is still hanging in the balance, but we hope they will succeed and we must defend these revolutions, even if we are critical of some of their practices. But in these and in many other countries, the route to socialism been one that necessarily ended democracy, took away certain freedoms and cost these countries an enormous amount in the form of lives lost and infrastructure destroyed. In many instances these conditions placed a dictatorship of populist, self-styled socialists, whose programs were usually not intended not to benefit the people, or if they were, became so perverted as to make this objective impossible to achieve. These scenarios are not necessarily our future, but the very least, we need to be honest about the price that must be potentially paid to build socialism.

In other countries, such as France, Italy or India, communist parties broke with other progressive forces to attempt to win power at the ballot box on their own. In almost all these instances, these parties have eventually returned to build new relationships with those they severed ties with in the name of ideological purity. Such historical detours have been costly to the parties themselves and more importantly to the people they seek to represent. In the name of ideological purity, a socialist chimera and in the name of the people themselves, leaders have taken decisions that have cost the masses everything and themselves little. We should be wary of calls to action to replace leaders with “super-revolutionaries”, in order that these will, in the manner of religious leaders, show us the way to some socialist nirvana.

## 7. A strong, independent party, a broad progressive movement, socialist values, progressive policies, campaigns and above all, democracy

The NDR is not to be squandered lightly. While it is a revolution owned by all the progressive forces in our society, it is one that faces contradictions arising from the conditions under which it occurs. Because of the fact that South Africa is a capitalist

country, in a global system of rampant capitalist accumulation and even hegemonic capitalist ideology, these forces are very dominant in our society. There are many capitalists, small, medium and large and even adherents of capitalist ideology in the ANC. Not all of these are capitalists by choice and certainly many of them are not hostile to the goals of improving the lives of our people. Many would consider themselves socialists or social democrats. In the name of ideological purity, but usually in the interests of a few individuals, there has been an opportunistic critique of some individuals who have accumulated private wealth but remained members of the ANC. Usually, if these individuals give donations to certain organisations, they are spared criticism, as are those trade unionists and political leaders who benefit from the spoils. Such hypocrisy is now par for the course in the NDR. There are also workers and unemployed people in the ANC who are social democrats. There are progressive people of faith in the ANC. Can socialism be achieved by antagonising all these people? It is doubtful. Even trade unions have undergone profound changes in the recent period. The traditions of selfless organisation, solidarity and of basic service to members are on the wane. Unions are often as much about business these days as they are about workers. Full-time trade union officials wield disproportionate power and the notion of worker control seems all but dead.

Socialist values are as important as being able to quote from Karl Marx. One of the most depressing features of the NDR of late has been the willingness of some to behave as if they are not accountable for their actions and that each time they are called to account or a suspicion is voiced, this is argued away as being part of a conspiracy against them because they are the only “true” revolutionaries left. If it were really that simple, if all that was needed to build socialism is to elect tried and tested leaders, then we would have had socialism already. After all, post 1990, we have been led by leaders of the calibre of Nelson Mandela, Chris Hani, Walter Sisulu, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma, Thenjiwe Mtinso, Cheryl Carolus and many more of that calibre. Instead of peddling this nonsense, socialist need to ensure that they are in the forefront of the hard work that needs to be done to build a tangible momentum for socialism. Equally depressing has been the tendency of some leaders not to regard themselves as accountable, even for the funds of their own organisations.

Where do these weaknesses manifest themselves? The fact that we in the movement are focussed on the palace politics of succession, while non-Congress aligned socialists lead the struggles and marches of the homeless and the poor, is one example. The fact that while we talk of worker unity we spend all our time trying to oust democratically elected leaders of the trade union movement is another. The fact that while we claim to be building an alternative socialised capital, the cooperative movement has collapsed and pension funds are stolen.

Socialism will only come about through honest, hard work. What does this entail? Among other things;

- Constantly developing Marxist theory so that that it begins to offer real answers to the current crisis of capitalism, in the form of clear policies, programs and campaigns. We must spare the ANC, SACP and COSATU no privilege, but we must also ensure that we are honest and accountable in our critique. Our diversions are our collective diversions.

- Re-building a strong, united, progressive movement with a disciplined and democratic party of the working class and the poor at its core. We need a renewal of strategic trade unionism that is non-racial and relevant. We need to focus more on single issue campaigns. The reality of life in our organisations is that it is boring, gender insensitive, boorish, full of bravado. We need to socialise our organisations.
- Recruiting and politically educating individuals and instilling socialist values in them to ensure that they are in the forefront of democratising the state, disciplining capital, running the various organisations of the working class and the poor, such as trade unions, community based, single issue and non-government organisations. Most importantly, such cadres need to be in the vanguard of socialising our society. There is a dearth of cadres who are ready to teach the next generation. Investing in people is the most important investment we can make.
- Engaging the working class and the poor in regular and relevant campaigns that teach disciplined mass mobilisation and techniques of working among the people that ready the working class and its allies for political power. We must socialise society.
- Strengthening socialist values by being in the vanguard of behaviour that seeks to unite progressive people, counters factionalism, conspiracy theories and gossip. The party must fight the system, not the people. It must learn and teach the art of revolution. Transparency, honesty, accountability, a service ethos, fairness are all important.

Above all, we must defend democracy. The right to voice opinions, views and ideas no matter how important, radical, boring or irrelevant is essential to the creation of a culture that will foster the unity, the cohesion and the capacity to build socialism..