

Alternatives from the Ground Up

**Anarchism/Syndicalism and (Black) Working Class Self-Emancipation in
Post-Apartheid South Africa**

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I think the previous panelists have put forward some pretty powerful arguments. So, I must start by thanking these comrades. We are addressing the issue of “How Do We Develop an Alternative?” and, more precisely, at how unions and community movements can develop this alternative. And by that, of course, we mean an alternative to the existing system, which traps millions upon millions in misery.

We need to be very careful not to reduce our critique of the current system to a critique of the system for creating *poverty*, for not creating enough *jobs*, for not building enough *houses*.

We must not forget that, originally, socialism stressed creating better material conditions for the working class, the peasantry, and the poor more generally (the “popular classes”) only *as a means to an end*, only as means to enable people to have *free, meaningful lives*.

Our disagreement with liberalism was not on whether people should be free; rather, it was that liberal solutions – free market capitalism and parliamentary democracy – were completely *inadequate* to the task of enabling ordinary people to have free, meaningful lives.

The Soviet Mirage

But this stress on freedom was lost with the rise to power of state-centered Left traditions, such as social-democracy from the 1890s and Marxist “communism” from the 1920s.

I know when the term “socialism” comes up, many in our movements will speak about the Soviet Union, or Cuba, as somehow “socialist.” A speaker on Monday, for example, said that the Soviet Union was a “work in progress”—but progressing in the right direction.

That same speaker added that the working class would be “demoralized” if something happened to Cuba, which has a similar system to that which the Soviet Union had before its collapse, along with its satellite states in Europe and Asia, from 1989 to 1991.

But what we are really doing if we identify the Soviet or Cuban models with “socialism,” is saying that it is possible to have a socialist system where the working class does not have basic trade union rights, is subject to internal passports (or, as we knew them in South Africa, pass laws); that we can have socialism where the working class and peasantry are ruled by a small bureaucratic and political and economic elite—a ruling class minority—that terrorizes its opponents, and uses secret police, forced labor, and ruthless dictatorship; that we can have socialism where the popular classes are not, in fact, in power.

Well, if that is “socialism,” then socialism is completely pointless. And I know someone will respond: “But comrade, consider the material gains of the Soviet people, the lack of unemployment, the massive industrialization—and the great health care system in Cuba today.”

But basic freedoms and human rights, and working class and peasant power, are not optional extras! If having jobs and hospitals or steel factories is what counts in measuring “socialism” then there is nothing that makes socialism superior, in any way whatsoever, to a range of explicitly capitalist dictatorships.

There were and are jobs and hospitals and steel factories under a range of capitalist, military dictatorships in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. But we do not call those socialist. Apartheid itself actively promoted heavy industry, and had less than 10 percent unemployment as well as continually expanding social services, until the 1970s. But we would never call it socialist.

Systems like the Soviet Union did not, and could not, deliver freedom and the opportunity for meaningful lives; they were systems of totalitarian state-capitalism. Freedom was not on the program. Having a red flag and citing Karl Marx and calling Cabinet Ministers “People’s Commissars” does not make one bit of difference if the basic social relations are exploitative and hierarchical.

Vanguard Parties? Social-Democratic Parties?

And that is why I get uncomfortable when comrade Zico Tamela, whose background is in the SACP, talks in favour of Bolshevik vanguard parties, the seizure of state power and so on.

I agree with the comrade on the need for radical change. And I say that the SACP has heroic traditions, and we should respect and learn from those traditions.

But not uncritically! The SACP's historic vision of socialism had very little "socialism" in it: its original reference point, the Soviet Union, was not socialist, but state-capitalist; and until the 1990s, the SACP ignored the dictatorship, repression, and the subjugation of the working class, peasantry, and poor that was central to the Soviet bloc.

The SACP's more recent reference point is social-democracy. Although this term is carefully avoided in SACP texts, the current project is effectively a social-democratic one: slowly reforming capitalism, through the capitalist state, and expanding the state bureaucracy.

Neither vision really deals with the key point that socialism should create freedom. Although social-democrats try to democratize society, they seek the impossible: to give capitalism a human face, using the state, and evolve it slowly into socialism. This is a reformist project—it seeks change through a series of reforms only—and it is a failed project, having collapsed worldwide by the early 1970s.

I am not confident that the SACP has a plan for change that will benefit the working class. And I also do not want to be ruled by SACP people like Blade Nzimande or Jeremy Cronin, given the heavy imprint on the party's political culture of the Soviet Union model, with its stress on a top-down "vanguard" party model.

After 1989: Rediscovering the Libertarian Left

For me, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet model, while it was temporarily disorientating for the popular classes (especially the large sectors that mistakenly saw this model as socialist), also opens up new vistas, new possibilities, space to rediscover the soul of the socialist project. The end of an illusion is always disorienting, but illusions need to end.

Militants will remember how hard it was in the 1980s to talk about “socialism” without talking about the Soviet Union. How, if the Soviet leadership said or did something, the impulse was to cheer and to ignore all the problems, or to claim the system was basically revolutionary, despite some “degeneration” or “deformation.”

Without the continual presence of the Soviet-type regimes we can start to re-envision—or should I rather say rediscover?—the more libertarian and genuinely socialist ways of thinking about socialism, the ways outside of the main-stream Marxist and social-democratic traditions, and recover the core values of socialism.

That Left project can again be fundamentally delinked from the mirages of the old East bloc, and the failures of Western social-democracy, again be relocated in radical democratic, libertarian Left traditions like anarchism and syndicalism.

Democracy from Below

Because really, socialism at its best, is also a critique of the rule of the many by the few. Not just a critique of the *exploitation* of the many by the few, not just a demand for a system in which people are not exploited. Not just a critique of the system for generating poverty.

It was, and is, also a critique of the *domination* of the many by the few, and of *multiple* relations of domination and oppression across society. It was, and is, about opposing people being impoverished, dominated, oppressed, not having dignity, about not having any real power in work, the neighbourhood, the school.

Just to give a small example: when we look at the so-called “service delivery protests” in South Africa, it is easy to assume that these are just protests about getting more water, electricity, and plumbing, delivered from on high, at the convenience of politicians.

But what people are actually highlighting is the simple, horrible fact that they have to blockade roads, confront town councillors, even damage property, just to get taps and toilets. This is an expression of the fact, the harsh truth that the common people exist in a disempowering system, where only protest, sometimes violent protest, gives the popular classes a *voice*. Because between protests, the masses are voiceless, ruled from above, and ignored.

And if we look at exploitation as well, what makes this possible? Partly, yes, working class people have no real choice but to work for wages: owning no productive resources, they must sell their labour-power. But at the workplace, it is *domination* by the employers, both private and state employers, through their apparatus of supervision and punishment, that actually *enables* exploitation by controlling movement, time, and energy.

To live free, meaningful Lives

If we want to seriously talk about alternatives to capitalism, we need to think about much more than more jobs and hospitals and steel factories: important as these are, they are not socialism. We need to think beyond the Marxist regimes and social-democratic and capitalist models of the twentieth century, rejecting all models that manifestly failed to meet the most basic criteria of working class and popular class power, dignity, autonomy, and freedom. We need to think about much more than just changing the political parties in office.

We need to think of radical, dramatic change—a social rupture, not just a series of modest reforms in the existing order. It is better to have a bigger cage, but it is still a cage. Reforms are valuable, but reformism is a dead end. It is essential to link reforms to a larger project of accumulating power and ideas for a revolutionary change in society.

This is why I like the point that my co-panelist comrade Mazibuko Jara of the independent Left was making, that we need to think about how socialism can change everyday life. That we need to think of socialism as a project that will empower the mass of the people—and therefore, I would say, as something very different to the old Soviet model, as well as something very different to the social-democratic model, which retains capitalism and bureaucratizes society.

Resources for Change: 1980s South Africa

In rediscovering the progressive, emancipatory, Left and working class project, we can start by rediscovering other paths that were opened by our own struggle in South Africa.

In the 1990s, we took the path of elections and state power. Our movements, including the SACP, decided to put the African National Congress (ANC) into parliament – the idea was that we would then “engage” the ANC, “contest” the ANC, and try to get it to implement pro-working class policies.

This approach has also been pretty much the program of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a program some have called “radical reform” or “strategic unionism.”

The labels sound very impressive, but amount to a social-democratic project. This project was a key rationale for establishing, in the early 1990s, the formal “Tripartite Alliance” between the ANC, COSATU, and the SACP, which continues today.

This project has not worked; capitalism and the state and the ANC were impervious to social-democratic interventions, and the Alliance seems impervious to policy proposals by the SACP or COSATU. If anything, the Alliance is used by the ANC to control COSATU and the SACP. The social-democratic project is here, as elsewhere, dead in the water. Only struggles seem to make the state listen.

The big path that we abandoned in doing this was the path opened up in the 1980s, of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the radical “workerist” Federation of the South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) at their best. These formations insisted that rather than be exploited, oppressed nationally, and disempowered, oppressed people should rather create *democratic organizations autonomous of the state*, through which to run their own lives and rebel, and *accumulate through these, the might to overthrow the regime*, and capacities that could *lay the basis for a new society*.

The UDF called this “people’s power.” FOSATU called this “workers’ control.” Here, democracy was not something that happened at elections, or through lobbying parties through structures like the Alliance, or through proposing policies through corporatist structures, but something built *right now*, in struggles and organizing. A new South Africa and a new nation *built from below*, from *outside* the state, and *by, primarily, the working class and the poor*. Thus, the UDF insisted (Morobe 1987, 40):

“By developing active, mass-based democratic organizations and democratic practices in these organizations, we are laying the basis for a future democratic South Africa. When we speak of majority rule, we do not mean that black faces must simply replace white faces in parliament.

“A democratic solution in South Africa involves all South Africans, and in particular the working class, having control over all areas of daily existence—from national policy to housing, from schooling to working conditions, from transport to consumption of food. When we say that the people shall govern, we mean at all levels and in all spheres, and we demand that there be real, effective control on a daily basis.”

Electoral Illusions Remain

But in the 1990s, we put our faith into elections, into parties. The UDF was closed, its remnants turned into ANC structures. COSATU was re-gearred as an Alliance partner for the ANC. And we never got anywhere near a situation of “all South Africans, and in particular the working class, having control over all areas of daily existence.”

Now, large sectors of the working class and the poor are waking up and seeing that the ANC cannot be fixed. But most, including most on the Left, have not recognized that the *whole system* is the problem. Most do not see the basic fallacy of using elections and lobbying political parties – they reject the ANC, but put their hopes in a new or a different party, like a workers’ or Left party of some sort.

What gets lost is the simple fact that all successful electoral parties become part of the capitalist state – and therefore, enemies of the people. If the ANC of Nelson Mandela – which rose on the back of the massive struggles and movements of the 1980s and which was watched with awe by the eyes of the whole world – failed to be different, why would any other party succeed?

The ANC is not the problem. *The system is the problem.* And it cannot be fixed.

Ruling Class – *NOT* Capitalist Class

But why do I say the state is *always* anti-working class?

When we talk about the ruling class, we often seem to think that the ruling class is a bunch of rich white capitalists in Constantia in Cape Town or in Sandton near Johannesburg, the owners of private capital. And yes, they are part of the ruling class!

But while it is correct to highlight the power of the (economic) elite that sits atop the private corporations, a focus on these completely fails to take into account the state (or political) elite that sits atop the state machinery, whose power resides in state institutions, including the army and the bureaucracy (and the state corporations). There are the people who run the state: ministers, directors, mayors, parliamentarians, vice-chancellors, generals. Their power rests not on private economic resources, but in the organizations they control.

Capitalists are only *one* part of the ruling class. The ruling class is a minority, its power rests on two institutions that centralize power and wealth so that this minority can rule the majority, the popular classes. And these two institutions are the corporation and the state, which share the basic features of top-down rule by and for an elite, exploitation of workers, the priority of ruling class interests.

These two institutions are interdependent, bound together, by these imperatives: the ongoing subordination and exploitation of the popular classes. There is a *single ruling class* that comprises those who own or control the means of production through private (and state) companies, plus those who own or control the means of administration and coercion, mainly through the state apparatus.

Resources: Libertarian Socialism, Anarchism, Syndicalism

Another set of important resources to be drawn upon in rethinking socialism can be found in the tradition of anarchism and syndicalism, which is the main expression of libertarian socialism, of anti-authoritarian socialism.

This is against hierarchy and social and economic inequality. Its critique of capitalism arises from these positions. It is for participatory and democratic decision-making wherever possible, including in the workplace, and in the larger economy, through measures like self-management and participatory planning, as well as in neighbourhoods, schools, and other sites. It is for the democratization of daily life, and about democracy in all possible areas.

And, because this tradition understands the state as an institution that shares basic features with corporations, and is fundamentally bound to the corporations at all times, and is beyond any possibility of capture by the popular classes, its position is anti-statist. *It does not see the state as the solution, but as part of the nexus of ruling class power.*

It argues that it is pointless having a revolution if you keep any system of domination, hierarchy, oppression or exploitation. That is not really a real change in society: it is a change in the masters, but not freedom for the slaves, the basic system of people dominating, oppressing, and exploiting each other remaining.

Self-Management, Self-Government

Other speakers on the panel have spoken about the need to capture the state, or to stand Left candidates in elections.

But as I have argued, the state cannot be captured by the popular classes, used by the working class, because it is a centralized institution of minority class rule, inextricably allied to the private corporations. This means that any workers' or left-wing party, aiming at state power, is a dead-end, no matter how well-intentioned, no matter its size, no matter its program or rules.

And that is why I take the UDF and FOSATU approaches, as well as anarchism/syndicalism, as key references in thinking about how we build an alternative – not because these are perfect, but because these stress a different way of doing things, “people’s power” and “workers’ control.”

Because these aim – at their best – to build popular *self-government outside*, even *against* the state, and *outside*, even *against* party control, by *popular resistance*, *building a future* based on deep-reaching changes in social relations.

And that it’s only by creating a new society, from below, through the struggles and movements of the popular classes that we can move to new social relations.

This is completely different from the dictatorial system that existed, for example, in the Soviet Union, completely different from the bureaucratic social-democratic welfare state that existed, for example, in Sweden, completely different from the passive politics of elections.

Let me be clear here that I am not claiming that modest changes in daily life and more democratic ways of doing things now, suffice to change society.

A new society based on self-management and self-government can only be created through ongoing, escalating class struggles, and will ultimately require the transfer of means of administration, coercion, and production into the hands of the popular classes. And that will ultimately involve a radical rupture in the social order, not a slow process of gradual transition or mass “exit” from the existing order.

Rather, it involves building organizations of *counter-power*, organizations that *counter* the power of the ruling class in immediate struggles, but that can eventually take power, *displacing* ruling class power, displacing the top-down system and *replacing* it with a bottom-up system that we build from below. This system of “people’s power” and “workers’ control” is built now, day-by-day, block by block, factory by factory, mine by mine, office by office – and it prefigures, as the UDF and FOSATU understood, a better future.

Power is not abolished here, it is taken. But not by a party, not by an elite, but by the great majority of society.

Building Tomorrow Today

A key principle that I want to extract from these two reference points – the UDF and FOSATU, and anarchism and syndicalism – is the importance of linking the *methods* of struggle to the *outcomes* of struggle. The way that people struggle now, is going to shape what they get in future.

There is no Chinese Wall between how people struggle, and what people get. The one shapes the other. Fighting through state elections, for example, means organizing to elect elites to deliver – at their convenience – some changes, from above, through the state. Building organizations based on authoritarian leadership, demagoguery, and manipulation is a direct route to a Promised Land based on authoritarianism, demagoguery, and manipulation.

If we organize democratically, and in a participatory way wherever possible, then we train ourselves in democratic practices, and we keep power in our own hands; we do not create, from within our movements, a new elite that will hijack our struggles. The way that struggle is conducted is extremely important.

How we fight shapes what we get: building this future also means building a unified popular class movement *now*, across the barriers and the borders, rejecting the idea that different sections of the popular classes are enemies of one another.

Like FOSATU, the UDF insisted that a movement fighting for a society based on justice, including racial equality and national liberation, must include people on the basis of their willingness to fight unconditionally for progressive change, rather than exclude people on the basis of their race or nation, which they cannot choose. The enemy was framed as a particular social system, rather than as particular races or nations. Thus, the UDF (Mosiua Lekota, quoted in *Neocosmos* 1996, 88):

“In political struggle... the means must always be the same as the ends... How can one expect a racialistic movement to imbue our society with a non-racial character on the dawn of our freedom day? A political movement cannot bequeath to society a characteristic it does not itself possess. To do so is like asking a heathen to convert a person to Christianity. The principles of that religion are unknown to the heathen let alone the practice.”

This stress on prefigurative thinking means, above all, an end to instrumentalist approaches. All too often, movements think in terms of how best to get “the masses” to a march, about how many heads can be counted. But bussing people to events they do not control is not building an active, self-governing movement. It is about turning people into spectators, or clients.

There is nothing to be gained from such methods, if the aim is self-emancipation. So, our movements have to be vigilantly, ruthlessly democratic.

Let me stress here that this requires *formal organization*: there must be clear procedures, mechanisms of accountability, and decision-making systems in place. Informal relations and processes

are a recipe for cabals and powerful individuals to take control and manipulate. And while consensus-based decision making can be useful, it easily turns into a means for stubborn minorities to veto majorities, effectively controlling decisions. Majority-based decision making is often more democratic.

Limits of the 1980s: Intolerance

Which brings us to important lessons that need to be drawn from the failures of South Africa's 1980s.

On the plus side: the broad working class built radical structures – street committees, civic/area-based structures, self-defence units, parent-teacher-student committees – exemplified by UDF affiliates and stressing “people’s power” as a method of organizing, and as a way of transforming society; and a radical union movement – based on assemblies, committees, and solidarity – exemplified by FOSATU and the early COSATU, and stressing “workers’ control” as a method of organizing, and as a way of transforming society.

On the negative side: all too often, ideas and practices undermined the principles and potentials of these great efforts. All too often, only one political line was permitted in the community-based structures: other currents were not allowed to participate, rival currents denounced as traitors, collaborators, and counter-revolutionaries. Many structures became “owned” by a party – normally the ANC. This happened throughout the UDF. By the late 1980s, COSATU was also becoming ANC territory, ANC-only. And ANC was not the only one that did this; all the nationalist parties had this impulse.

This undermined, weakened, corrupted the bottom-up structures of “people’s power” and “workers’ control.”

Street committees sometimes degenerated into street terror; mass mobilization and careful education were sometimes replaced by forcing people to join campaigns; an anti-apartheid approach was often simply a code for blind loyalty to one party, sometimes violently enforced.

Such practices have cost the popular classes heavily, opening the door to the blind, even paranoid loyalty to certain political parties that we see today, to the intolerance of criticism that we see today in the ANC and in COSATU.

That is the legacy of the failings of the 1980s.

For Debate and Pluralism

Instead of this closing down of space, we need to enable *political pluralism* in our organizations: many views, open debates, and issues decided on their merits, not on personalities and not through cabals. This builds stronger movements, *and* it is essential to any project of building a bottom-up, freedom-based alternative, both in the present and for the future.

Not all views are correct—but let us debate them, not suppress them; let us be tolerant of difference, willing to listen. Let us also avoid the debating tactics and styles that close down real discussions, like labelling people, like dismissing theory as “dogma,” like using jargon.

And let us realize that a future society, governed from the bottom-up, also has to ensure political pluralism, and avoid the temptation to close debate and contestation in the name of “saving” the revolution.

If revolution – this what the radical rupture of which I spoke means, a class-based revolution – is to occur, it is about replacing domination, exploitation, and hierarchy with a radically democratic social order: self-management, self-government, collective property, classlessness, and statelessness.

But since the aim is maximize freedom, efforts to save the new society by *closing* down freedom will kill the revolution from within – just as surely as any external counter-revolutionary threat. This is the genesis of Soviet Union-type regimes: genuine revolutions were killed from within, by self-declared vanguards claiming to “save” the revolution.

Linking different Struggles

Another principle that can be drawn from FOSATU, the UDF, and anarchism/syndicalism, is that most of the struggles that are being fought by different parts of the popular classes – whether around health issues, or gender equality, or job loss, or even municipal demarcation for that matter – are largely responses to a *common system*; they are *different fronts* in the class struggle. A great many of the problems we face have roots in a *common system*. And those that cannot be reduced to that system, are intensified, worsened, by that system.

The UDF, for example, was able to link the fight against racist, oppressive laws to fights around wages, rents, and education, and capitalism, framing the main enemy as apartheid. FOSATU, for example, linked struggles for union rights to fights over control of production and efforts to mobilize working class neighbourhoods, framing the main enemy as racist capitalism.

The enemy is not corrupt individuals, or a particular party, or individual, or group, but a *class system* centred on a ruling class. Now if there is one main enemy, it is possible then to think of building a common working and popular class front, a *revolutionary front of the popular classes*.

Why a Class-based Approach?

What FOSATU (with its stress on working class power) understood better than the UDF (which aimed at a multi-class nationalist front, including the “progressive” bourgeoisie) was that *only the popular classes can bring about the deep, radical changes needed to ensure the complete class and national emancipation of the majority.*

Why a class-based movement, and a revolutionary front of the popular classes?

Because only oppressed classes, which do not exploit, have the numbers, power and interest in creating a new, classless, stateless, society. Exploiting classes cannot end exploitation; ruling classes cannot end class rule. So making alliances with sections of the ruling class, even “progressive” sections, as the UDF did, means accepting class society.

Class provides a basis to unify people across the divisions like race, culture, nationality, and gender, around common interests. It enables the struggle of the popular classes against an oppressive system that generates multiple oppressions and inequities – not a struggle against individuals or against specific racial or ethnic groups. And without unity along a class axis, society fractures easily into all-sided conflicts, from which no progressive outcomes are possible. The cases of Germany in the 1930s and Rwanda in the 1990s show what horrors such fracturing can generate.

So, I like the point that comrade Zico was making about revisiting the option, raised in COSATU and in the SACP, of forming a broad *working class* front, rather than a multi-class *national* [popular] front.

Revolutionary National Liberation, Anti-Colonialism

Also, so long as class systems remain, not only will most people remain exploited and dominated as members of the popular classes, but the class system will generate — or at least, worsen — other forms of oppression.

This means that even issues like racial and national oppression are difficult to resolve within class societies.

As an example: the apartheid legacy, which is central to South Africa's ongoing national question, cannot be resolved without a massive redistribution of wealth and power to the black working class. But this massive redistribution requires massive class struggles.

The majority of the South African working class — black African, Coloured, and Indian — is not just oppressed as an exploited and dominated class. *It is still oppressed on national (or if you prefer, racial) grounds.*

The apartheid system, and its segregationist and colonial predecessors, rested on the exploitation of the whole working class, white workers included, but its political economy centred on cheap black labour, what some call the “colonial wage.” Capitalist relations of production were intertwined with colonial relations of domination, and involved a battery of racist measures, extra-economic coercion, and urban and rural underdevelopment on racial lines, plus poisonous doctrines of white supremacy, which still scar our land.

And while today, we have a post-apartheid society, with a growing black elite, it is still a capitalist society. And that capitalist society still rests upon the ongoing national oppression of the black African, Coloured, and Indian working class, on cheap black labour, *still* involves the continued power of the old apartheid-era “white monopoly capital” private corporations, and is *still* present in everyday life in the form of a deep apartheid legacy of fractured cities, low-grade education, electricity and other services in townships and rural areas, and racist thinking.

And such a situation simply *cannot* be ended by a few reforms. It requires radical change, and *only* a working class movement — specifically, one centred on the black African working class — can make that radical change, because that means a fight against the ruling class, both black and white, since the *whole* ruling class [black and white] rests on, benefits from, the system of cheap black labour.

Prioritising the Oppressed

So, let us be clear here: building a class-based movement, a revolutionary front of the popular classes, does not —as some critics suggest — mean *ignoring* issues that cannot be neatly reduced to class, like racial or national oppression. It simply means addressing these issues on a *class-struggle* basis, and linking them in the largest possible class front against *all* oppression.

Unions must be a key part of any class-based movement, any revolutionary front of the popular classes, as they have numbers and power — and above all, access to the workplaces, a crucial site of struggle. But the class front is more than a union front: it needs to bring together movements and struggles in a range of areas and struggles. And, as I have said, it also needs to bring together people with a range of views, meaning that it must have space for a range of ideas, for debates, and for tolerance.

It is possible and necessary to build a united movement, linking working class/poor communities, labour movements, and other sites of struggle, among them those of working class students. To build a common movement that fights on a class basis for the *general interests* of the popular classes, that at the same time gives a high priority to the *specific problems* faced by the *most oppressed* sections of the popular classes. A common movement that *prevents elite classes* from hijacking the struggles, and that is based on *anti-authoritarian, class-struggle principles*.

Let us take women's oppression. I have been a member of the National Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) in the past, and I remember in my union branch, 80 percent of the members were women but 80 percent of the leaders were men. And this was partly because of the specific problems women workers faced in society — a gender-based wage gap, discrimination, the dual burden of waged work and housework, gender-based violence, and so on — and also because of the gender stereotypes that comrades, women and men, brought into the union.

Now those are the sorts of things we have to challenge. *How* we build the movement, as I say, is very important. We cannot build a society where women are equals if we leave the fight against women's oppression for later. It has to be waged now, as core to building and a revolutionary class politics.

Against Labour Aristocracy and “Privilege” Theories

This comes up, of course, against the claim pushed from a range of positions — including many nationalists and feminists, and some “identity politics” currents — that insists that some groups in the working and popular classes benefit from the double or triple oppression that others face.

The *opposite* is generally true, as the divisions in the popular classes harm *all* sections, creating antagonisms, undermining conditions, and weakening organisations. (Leaving aside the special case of apartheid’s white working class).

Black immigrant workers in South Africa face severe oppression *as immigrants*, but who *benefits* from this? Not local workers, whose wages are undercut, but employers who get cheaper labour, and politicians who get easy scapegoats. Even if every immigrant was deported, mass unemployment would remain — a truth hidden by blame-the-“foreigner” thinking.

South African workers are not “privileged” in being free of this anti-immigrant oppression, they are harmed by it; and it is not a “privileged” position to not suffer every possible form of oppression and humiliation.

The solution is *not* to unite the popular classes on a crude “economistic” basis that ignores the specific, additional oppressions some sectors face. Rather, it is to build a *principled unity* that understands that the principle “An Injury to One is an Injury to All,” means *opposing all forms of special/additional oppression*, whether based on race, nation, gender, or whatever. But *through a common and united class-based movement*.

Limits of the 1980s: Ideological

Obviously elements of the approach I have outlined were absolutely central to the UDF and FOSATU. But just as obviously, the UDF and FOSATU never walked the path that they themselves opened, to its logical end point: a radical rupture and new social order, based on bottom-up democracy and a system of common property, without a state and without classes.

Why? It comes down to political ideas. The battle for change involves a battle of ideas. No revolutionary ideas? No revolution.

UDF structures, FOSATU structures, at their best, had the basic *structures* of a counter-power that, if more fully developed, expanded, and extended, could have helped displace and replace ruling class power.

But *ideologically and politically*, they were eventually *flooded* by ideas, especially the ideas of the ANC and SACP, which prevented such outcomes. This included the ANC's top-down tendencies, its intolerance of rivals, its politics of Messianic leadership, and its focus on getting state power. But even before the big revival of ANC and SACP influence in the 1980s, the ideas in the UDF and FOSATU were too *confused* to carry out a project of counter-power.

And this got us to where we are today. ANC ideas had a very good side — stressing non-racialism, anti-apartheid, rebellion, and social justice — along with a very bad side — a national alliance of *all* classes against apartheid, rather than class struggle; the aim of creating a reformed capitalism, rather than deep change; and the use of the state, rather than a direct transfer of power to the masses.

And this led directly to what we have today: despite real gains in basic rights and welfare, and the abolition of apartheid laws, South Africa's transition remains limited and frustrating, the legacy of the past remains everywhere in the present. The black elite, frustrated and humiliated under apartheid, segregation and colonialism, has largely achieved its national liberation. The black working class *has not* —and its fight for *complete national liberation* is being beaten back by the *whole* ruling class, black and white.

Change the Mind, change the World

So, changing the world requires building organs of struggle and developing these into *organs of counter-power*. But building counter-power has to be accompanied by a revolutionary shift in what people believe, that is, it involves building *a mass-based revolutionary counter-idea or counter-culture*.

The idea is the thing! Unless we have what Mikhail Bakunin called a “new vision,” a “new faith,” we will fail, as the UDF and FOSATU failed.

Here, comrade Mazibuko’s point about South Africa being a socially conservative society, despite its high levels of protests, is very important. Many people believe that the existing system is, in its essentials, fine, and that the system works, except that it is abused by foreigners, or crooks, or politicians like ex-ANC head Jacob Zuma, or minorities, or young women on welfare etc. The idea of a bottom-up society is far from the minds of most people.

The South African state has maybe 159,000 police and 70,000 soldiers. Public order police are less than 7,000. At least 35 million South Africans are working class, but the working class — despite its vast numbers — does not move to a big struggle for decisive change. This pattern of containment is not a military issue.

What keeps the people down is *the soldier in the head* — who says we cannot emancipate ourselves, that we cannot possibly run society, that we cannot possibly have something different, better.

And that is why I am talking about the need to complement the battle for *counter-power* with the battle to build a revolutionary *counter-culture*, together countering the ruling class’s control at the ideological, cultural, and organisational levels.

The Need for an Organised Tendency

Now, a political formation, based on clear ideas, a clear strategy, and disciplined unity, which aims to promote counter-power and revolutionary counter-culture is, in my view, *essential* to this project.

It can play a key role in conscientising people, in mobilising, in organising, in fighting the battle of ideas — but it must never be substituted for the self-activity of the popular classes, never assume direct power over the popular classes; it should act as a current within the masses, and aim at the leadership of the revolutionary Idea; and it must never enter the state.

It can play a key role, if it aims to build counter-power and counter-culture, and facilitates and assists this building, if it fights to *democratically win the battle of ideas as a tendency within a pluralistic working class movement*, if it aims *at getting its ideas to be the leading ideas* to be implemented by the masses.

But a conventional political party? No thanks. These treat the movements of resistance as wings of the party, these place control in their own hands, these build within themselves new hierarchies and new elites, these aim to use the state, these enter into the state. They cannot achieve the goals of counter-power and counter-culture — in fact, they undermine them.

Reforms from below, not Reformism

As I stressed before, the state cannot be an instrument for working class power and freedom. The state institution, by its basic nature and its basic imperatives, must always place ruling class interests first.

Politically, this means that movements of counter-power and revolutionary counter-culture need to be movements *outside* of, and *against*, the state itself, not movements to launch parties, to lobby parliament, to tweak policies, but movements of struggle, bulwarks of the popular classes facing off against both state and capital — and aiming to replace them with something better — themselves!

This does *not* mean refusing to fight for reforms, it means fighting for reforms *through* counter-power. *And this means rejecting reformism but fighting for reforms in ways that build counter power/counter culture.*

States do sometimes make progressive reforms, but these reforms arise under the pressure of the struggles of the popular classes. Just as wage gains are primarily produced by campaigns and strikes, so are progressive changes in laws and policies.

The reforms are concessions forced upon the ruling class, the product of popular class power, imposed upon the ruling class through struggles. They are not the consequence of which party, leader, or faction is in state office at a given point. They have nothing to do with elections, policy lobbying, or corporatism.

Counter-power is, in fact, *built through fights for small reforms.* And even though these fights are for small things, these struggles also provide a basis from which to fight for bigger things, by building capacities, momentum, and confidence. So small strikes, small struggles are important, and lay the basis for big struggles. If people cannot win fights to keep the lights on, they cannot possibly win fights for deeper, more systemic, change. And it's also in daily battles that people become most open to the radical ideas expressed in a revolutionary counter-culture.

“Policy-from-Below”

This does *not* mean economism: as I said earlier, it’s essential to fight of a range of fronts, and to fight all forms of oppression.

This does *not* mean only dealing with narrow and immediate issues either, ignoring larger economic and social policy issues.

We have spent a great deal of time, especially in our unions, trying to propose alternative policies to the state, the ANC, the Alliance.

But these policies centre on trying to tweak the existing system, and so, accept its framework. They try to control and fix capitalism — a system we do not control, and cannot fix — and rely on the state — an institution we do not control, and cannot control.

And these efforts have involved a top-down mode of politics where efforts are centred on making proposals at NEDLAC (National Economic Development and Labour Council), a corporatist body, or lobbying parliament, or the ANC’s National General Council. And they have involved developing very technical policies that most people in the unions and elsewhere do not understand — and, more importantly, played no part in designing.

And pretty much all of these policies have been completely ignored, so it’s all been pointless anyway.

Let me rather suggest that a movement of counter-power can engage in economic and social policy, but through tactics that I will call *policy-from-below*.

Instead of policy as a technocratic exercise, we should use conflicts around policies proposed or developed by the state as a means of *movement-building*, of *campaigning*. This involves building campaigns in which our policies are developed *through mass movements and discussions*; not developed by a few experts at COSATU House or in a university or an NGO.

Let’s say the state is talking about cutting the Child Support Grant, the monthly cash transfer to poor parents. It is *not* the movements’ job to come up with an alternative state Budget so that the state can fund the grant more *effectively*. It is not the movements’ job to develop an alternative set of welfare and economic policies for the state, within the existing system, as if the problem is *not* also the state, not the *system*, but just bad policies.

Rather, from this perspective, it is the movements’ job to find the level of Child Support Grants that the working class *wants*, and to do this through participatory processes and discussions; and to use these discussions to raise larger issues around how society works, the distribution of wealth and power that favours the ruling class, the political economy; to educate the masses around these issues; to use these processes to build our organizations, to struggle for what we want. And to mobilize for the demands developed, and *impose* these on the state and capital through struggle.

The stress here is on direct action, mass mobilisation, self-emancipation, and building counter-power and revolutionary counter-culture.

From Resistance to Reconstruction

Building counter-power/counter-culture requires a clear strategy for moving from resistance to reconstruction. This includes generalising immediate and sometimes localised defensive struggles into larger battles, linking fights around wages and conditions to drives to standardise incomes and conditions and universalise rights, unifying the popular classes including by fighting all forms of oppression, and accumulating capacities that will enable counter-power to take direct control over means of production, coercion, and administration — not just in one country, let me stress, but *internationally*.

The approach to struggle and policy-making that matches this strategy is *militant abstentionism*, that is, an insistence on our autonomy from the ruling class and our refusal to co-manage the bosses' system. It does not aim to come up with any solutions for capitalism or the state, like alternative “people's budgets” to the government, or industrial policy proposals through corporatism. In terms of workplace relations, it means building a union movement takes *no* responsibility whatsoever for capitalism or the state — that, instead, fights them.

In Closing: Tomorrow is built Today

A new social order is the real solution to the multiple crises that wrack humanity and its planet. It will not emerge spontaneously, or from disconnected local struggles and experiments. It can build on the best of FOSATU and the UDF, but it needs to infuse ideas and insights from anarchism and syndicalism, and build a revolutionary class front.

It's not an easy or quick approach, but there are no shortcuts. We need to engage in forms of protest and organising and debate and ideas that empower, that break the commodity form, that break the power of the bosses in the factories, that break the power of politicians and elections, that enable national liberation, and that build the framework of a new world in the shell of the old.

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Lucien van der Walt
Alternatives from the Ground Up
Anarchism/Syndicalism and (Black) Working Class Self-Emancipation in Post-Apartheid South
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This commentary, an input at a Globalization School debate in Cape Town, engages current labour and Left debates on building alternatives, drawing on the experiences of the radical wing of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and on anarchism and syndicalism. It argues for a strategy of bottom-up mobilization based on debate and pluralism, and building structures of counter-power and a revolutionary counter-culture that can prefigure and create a new social order. The aim is to foster a class-based movement against exploitation, domination, and oppression, including national oppression, that can win reforms through self-activity, unite a range of struggles against oppression, and develop the capacity and unity needed for deep social change. This should be outside parliament, the political party system and the state. The outcome, ultimately, would be the replacement of capitalism, the state, and social and economic inequality, by a universal human community based on self-management, the democratization of daily life, participatory economic planning, and libertarian socialism.

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