

Towards a Truly Democratic Left

An anarchist assessment of the DLF at COP17

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The recent gathering of DLF comrades for the Durban COP17 protests was at once a step forward for working class unity within the DLF — and a tale of what has gone wrong with the DLF and its leadership structure. On the one hand, for almost a week we as social movements activists from different parts of the country toyi-toyed and struggled together, shoulder-to-shoulder on the streets of Durban and at The People’s Space, and tried to defend ourselves against the ANC’s hired thugs. On the other hand, sad to say, the leadership left comrades feeling that they were being herded like cattle from one place to another and used as a rent-a-crowd to impress the organisers’ donors and international contacts. Questions from food and accommodation to what was talked about in the programme were set in advance by the leaders with little regard to the wishes of the masses. Even in the street clash with the ANC’s “Green Bombers”, leaders of the DLF acted directly against mandates by trying to stop comrades from defending themselves. And after all this, these same leaders — mostly intellectuals with no base in struggling working class communities — announced unilaterally, without a mandate, that they would be extending their term of office until December 2012. How can it be that the steering committee’s first mandate coming out of the DLF founding conference in January 2011, to have elections for leadership in the respective provinces, can take nearly two years to implement? This should not be permitted.

Some failures of democracy at the COP17 protests

Perhaps the leaders think food is just a small matter — but if they are serious about being democratic, they could have taken the trouble to find out in advance what people want to eat. Not that it is so much trouble to find out. Anybody who has worked on the ground with black working class communities in South Africa should know that very spicy foods are far from popular, and that people are accustomed to eating mielie pap as opposed to things like rotis and rice. As people who are supposed to be able to articulate the needs and desires of our people, the so-called leaders should at least find out what food we eat and what our expectations are. In practice, it was only when grassroots comrades demanded to get involved in these decisions that the food and catering committee stepped in to improve the situation.

And the whole programme was the same story: leaders deciding without considering what the masses want. From the moment we arrived we were herded from one place to another. We were told what the programme was and where to be when, but we were not consulted or involved in determining the programme in the first place. Of course, they will tell us that we could have been involved in developing the programme had we attended and been involved in the COP17 civil society planning meetings prior to going to Durban, but how many people from the townships could get to Johannesburg for these? By opening these meetings to us, while knowing very well that very few working class comrades would be able to attend regularly, they only pay lip service to the democratic development of the political programme.

We carried out an illegal march, but many of the people that marched seemed not to be aware at the time that the march was illegal and that they could therefore have faced arrest. This is authoritarian and undemocratic, as the members themselves — the ones who could have been arrested for marching illegally — should have been involved in deliberating and deciding whether or not to march. It is not democratic for the leaders to put us at risk of facing arrest and then only tell us afterwards, or as an aside, that it was an illegal march.

We were told that we would be delivering a memorandum. By the time we left Durban many comrades were still unsure as to whether or not the memorandum had been delivered and, if so, who received it. We were not consulted or involved in drafting the memorandum and, perhaps worse, it was not even read to us for our approval prior to it being delivered.

When grassroots comrades expressed that they were tired of the programme and wanted to go to the beach they were sent from pillar to post. First we were supposed to go to the beach after the march, then we were told we were going the next morning, then the next afternoon. In the end comrades got so frustrated they simply walked out of the programme and went to the beach. All the indecision and going backwards and forwards between the leadership left many comrades feeling frustrated, and this was sometimes taken out on the marshals – causing friction within the grassroots organisations that make up the base of the DLF.

And perhaps the worst display of authoritarian leadership occurred at the march on the international day of action. The night before the march we as the DLF had unanimously decided to march peacefully, but that if attacked we would defend ourselves. When we were attacked by ANC thugs on the day of the march DLF leaders actively disarmed activists by taking away the flag-poles they were using to defend themselves. A short while later DLF leadership asked the police to stand between us and the “Green Bombers”. This was in blatant disregard of the decision, taken the previous night, by the entire DLF membership to defend ourselves from attack. It was also a betrayal of our class to call in the class enemy to defend us in such a minor altercation. One last example of how the leadership places more importance on their political programme than the will of the people came on the last day, when leaders pleaded with us to stay an extra two hours for the Climate Jobs booklet launch, so that they could impress their funders and international contacts. The result of this, however, is that comrades were almost left stranded at night in Johannesburg and had to make last minute arrangements to be accommodated by other comrades as it was too late for them to catch connecting buses and taxis to their final destinations. That this would be a problem if we stayed longer in Durban was raised with the leadership, but our concerns fell on deaf ears.

Democracy versus authoritarianism: behind the failures

Unfortunately, all these and many other failures of democracy have been a big part of the history of the DLF. We in the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front (ZACF) have had to raise such challenges several times (see “DLF structure: concerns and proposals” by ZACF). We have long been troubled by the lack of proper democratic structures, by a leadership that consists far more of middle-class intellectuals than of grassroots militants, and by a programme that seems to be determined in advance by the academic and NGO interests of these intellectuals instead of by the immediate needs of the workers and the poor. I could not be very surprised when a comrade told me in Durban: “This has been a terrible f**cking experience, to come here and be told what to do by a white messiah.” Not that race is the only issue here – there are many black comrades in DLF leadership – but irrespective of race, the leaders have shown that they are detached from the ground. This, too, shows up in the most obvious ways. I didn’t once see any of the DLF leadership eating with us or travelling on the buses with us, and not once did I see any of them visiting our accommodation to see exactly what comrades had been complaining about. I don’t know where exactly the leadership stayed nor who paid for it (although rumours are that they

stayed in hotel rooms in the city centre), but I think it is a concern for them not to have been with the majority of members, sharing in our trials and tribulations.

Of even more concern than the lack of democracy and participation, however, is the fact that the style of leadership of the current leaders actually threatened to cause division within the working class and community organisations. This is because of the top-down leadership style that was practised. Because the marshals — who represented a much more legitimate leadership than the official leadership — were the only point of contact between the leaders and the masses, they came under criticism from the base every time the leadership messed us around by making and changing decisions without our participation, and then having them transmitted to us by the marshals, who were often not involved in making decisions either.

We have to ask ourselves then, comrades, if this is the DLF we want to build? A DLF where the leadership makes all the political decisions and the members are just expected to follow them. A DLF where the leaders eat different food and stay in different accommodation to the majority. A DLF where the leadership can get away with going against the decisions of the people. If that is the DLF we are building, what will the socialism we are fighting for look like?

Having lived and struggled with comrades on the ground for almost a week, having experienced the same challenges and disappointments and listened to comrades grievances and desires, I think I can say that this is not the kind of DLF we want to build.

We do not want a DLF where the leadership is removed from the base, a DLF where decisions are taken from above. We do not want a socialism where the leadership eat different food and stay in different accommodation to the masses. Socialism means that we are all leaders, and that we all therefore share in the burden and the fruits of struggle together, side-by-side.

The problem here is not that the current DLF leadership are bad people, or that they intentionally put people in poor accommodation and gave them food that was not to their liking. Neither do I think that the political programme was made to bore and confuse people. And we all have reason to welcome the opportunities that COP17 gave us to come together, to share our experiences and ideas. I must be clear that my criticisms are political. The gap between the DLF leadership and the grassroots comrades is the result of a particular approach to viewing and organising movements. A view that suggests that a minority of intellectuals have all the right strategies and answers, and the working class constituents must just follow along. Rather than being collectively deliberated and determined at the grassroots, the political programme of the DLF has by-and-large been decided by the leadership, who have then sought ‘mass’ support for it through mobilisation and organising on the ground. This has to some extent been successful and the fact that the DLF was able to mobilise around 500 people from across the country for COP17 suggests that this campaign really does speak to the needs and struggles on the ground. However, despite finding a lot of support from below, planning and mobilising for COP17 was largely done in a centralised and top-down manner by a relatively small group of intellectuals and academics. It was because of this that the political programme did not really meet the majority of people’s expectations and, as such, it is because of this that the grassroots militants of the DLF were less engaged than they could have been and, indeed, assumed relatively little responsibility over driving the entire process. This needs to change. In order to safeguard against too much power and responsibility being invested in just a few people, thus leading to undemocratic practices, we need to ensure that our political programmes are collectively determined at a grassroots level by the activists that make up the base of the DLF, and not by an intellectual minority. In

so doing, comrades will be encouraged to assume greater responsibility over collectively driving the process of building the DLF.

Conclusion: towards a truly democratic left

In going forward we need to build on the good work that was done in bringing us to Durban, on the networks built and experience gained while we were there, struggling for a better future. But, in so doing we need to be careful to avoid the pitfalls and failures that became apparent in Durban. We need to focus on building the organisations and movements that make up the DLF in our communities. We need to ensure that these movements represent the will and the needs of their members, that they are truly democratic and that the people that are elected into positions of leadership are accountable to the members, and that they truly represent our interests. If we can do this, then building a truly democratic and effective DLF will be easy, provided we also work to ensure that the DLF is driven from below, and that its campaigns come from below and truly express the will of the people. We need to be very careful of and question the role and motives of NGOs when involving them in our struggles. If they want to be involved in building a truly democratic DLF, the intellectuals and NGOs must put their resources, knowledge and skills at the service of the working class organisations and movements that make up its base, and not use these to advance their own academic and political agendas. The DLF's campaigns must come from the grassroots, must be formulated in affiliates, in local branches, and in facilitation committees controlled by these affiliates and local branches. And however noble their intentions may be, the DLF's leaders cannot be permitted to postpone elections and perpetuate their term of office without a mandate.

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