

Anarcho-syndicalism for South African unions today

Speech to Metalworkers

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Lucien van der Walt — author of Black Flame: The revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism (with Michael Schmidt, 2009, AK Press) and editor of Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940 (with Steve Hirsch and Benedict Anderson, 2010, Brill) — was an invited speaker at the 2013 inaugural National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) Political School.

He debated anarcho-syndicalist versus Leninist views of the potential of trade unions, with Solly Mapaila, Second Deputy General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP).

The NUMSA Political School was held at Benoni, Gauteng, South Africa, September 13–18, 2013, on the theme of “The Political Role of Trade Unions in the Struggle for Socialism.” NUMSA is the largest trade union in South Africa: an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), NUMSA has been a radical opponent of the policies of the ruling African National Congress to which both COSATU and the SACP are formally allied.

This transcript captures Lucien van der Walt’s main points, as well as selections from the other speakers where they are essential to understanding the discussion. It has been lightly edited for publication.

Initial input in response to David Masondo’s presentation, titled “From Rustenburg to Ongoye: The Evolution of the SACP’s Programmatic Approach”

Lucien: Okay, well, obviously I am not a NUMSA member, not being a metal worker, so maybe I am even speaking out of turn... although I am a lapsed SA Communist Party member. I joined the Party once. Which means I have a card, somewhere, but they don’t call me. Maybe they have my details wrong!

Floor: Laughter

Lucien: But on the other hand I don’t have to give the SA Communist Party any money. I don’t get anything and I don’t give anything.

Floor: Laughter

Okay now, Comrade David, you lay out only two options.

First: we fix the SACP or, second, maybe we set up a SACP Mark 2, the new version, the new edition.

Comrades who are auto workers know that every couple of years you bring out a new car. The problem is that a car is a car. And a car can’t fly, and if there is a problem with cars only some changes can be made. There are certain things that they can’t do and certain things they can do. Same for parties.

Maybe the question is to think about the political form itself. Is the political party an appropriate form? Do we need a party to carry out the political vanguard role of the working class? Why can’t this role be done by a trade union? Right now, actually, that’s what’s happening. We are debating if it’s a possibility, but right now we have a situation where NUMSA is *already* providing a vanguard leadership to the working class. Not just in its own ranks. Sections of COSATU, sections of the unemployed, sections of social movements, they all look to NUMSA.

You now want to bring the SA Communist Party back on track, although you have left it far behind. You’ve left it behind; you, the unions, are far ahead of that party. You are also two steps to the left of the Communist Party. You are playing a vanguard role that the Communist Party hasn’t done. But then, you say: “No, we must go back to the Communist Party to have a vanguard”!

Floor: Laughter and applause

Lucien: So that doesn't make sense to me. I am saying that it's a issue about the form, and the method. If you want to give political direction to the working class, why can't you, the unions, do it? Why can't the union be a vanguard ideological and mobilizing force? Why can't NUMSA, for example, be the core of a union movement that shifts things?

That's what you have done already! It's not my idea, it's *your* idea and it is what you have done already.

So that would be my suggestion:... I ask: is there not a third option? Not SA Communist Party Mark 2. Not SA Communist Party, the 2014 edition. Not SA Communist Party rebranded as a "mass worker party."

But rather, a third form of politics here, which is a *revolutionary trade union movement* that will provide a link between the different layers of the working class. Provide the basis of a bottom-up coalition of social movements and other unions in class struggle. And that will put on the forefront, not nationalization by the state, but collectivization: workers' control of the means of production through the union. Through the union, not through the state: through the union.

So, I will leave it there...

Main input: Debating anarcho-syndicalist versus Leninist views of the potential of trade unions, with Solly Mapaila, Second Deputy General Secretary of the South African Communist Party

MC Oupa Bodibe: I'm sorry, I have to cut you off Comrade Solly. Lucien, I know that you are very eager to respond.

But first, I have several questions for you. Lucien, there are two arguments that should be taken forward today. One is the view that trade unions tend to "standardize" capitalism. They support it, okay? Because if you looking at the capitalism that has become more social friendly, or more developmental and also more pro-poor, workers now have a much bigger role to ensure the equal distribution of resources. That is the point I want to make.

The second argument is that one that Comrade Dinga Sikwebu talked about earlier: the inherent conservatism of the trade union movement. This is something that is coming up in meetings.

Do you think these statements are valid for all times? Or do they speak to different historical positions and balances of power in the trade union movement?

Lucien: Let's step back. The arguments that I will criticize, the arguments that Comrade Oupa is alluding to, the arguments that unions are always inherently limited, reformist and economic, are summed up in V.I. Lenin's *What is To be Done?*

So what does that work say? And is it right? If we take *What is To be Done?* at face value, it essentially suggests that it is the normal nature of unions to be concerned only with day-to-day and narrow economic issues.

If we have to take Lenin's *What is To be Done?* at its face value, it also says that unions are reformist, in the sense that they only look at small issues. That in fact they are unable, in a fundamental way, to look at larger issues. That this is partly because they supposedly divide the working class. And there's something in this: NUMSA deals with metal and allied industries, while other COSATU unions deal with, for example, teachers and schools, and you are all in different unions.

So from Lenin's perspective, part of the problem is that unions are dealing with small issues, they are dealing with the narrowest economic issues, and they reflect the divisions within the working class.

And for Lenin, these reasons meant that unions really struggle to think beyond the immediate issues. They struggle to think beyond capitalism and to imagine a better, transformed society. And this is where Lenin then brings in the argument for the unions having to be permanently led by a so-called Marxist “vanguard party,” a party of the type that the SA Communist Party claims to represent. To put it another way, the unions cannot be revolutionary, and cannot play a key role in fighting for socialism, *unless* a Marxist vanguard party is giving them orders. They can be “revolutionary” only when they aid a Communist Party, and even then, only by providing some muscle, not a political direction, not a leading role.

But is this line of thinking really correct?

Well, I think one way to look at all of these issues is to be historical. And if we do that, we have to admit that some unions – and there is no way we can doubt that – some unions are conservative. Some unions are reformist, and all they interested in is better wages and better conditions. In this sense they are also economistic. They fit Lenin’s model.

But that’s not the same thing as saying that *all* unions, in *all* circumstances, are narrowly trapped in reformism and economism. I think if we want to look more historically, it becomes possible to see a range of union experiences that go far beyond what Leninist theory would predict

The problem with Lenin’s argument is that while unions have reformist tendencies, they are just *tendencies*. There are *other* forces going in other directions, and these can take unions much further than Lenin’s *What is To be Done?* suggests.

So we can find many unions which conform perfectly to Lenin’s model. And maybe the Russian trade unions that Lenin was dealing with conformed perfectly to his model.

But if we look historically and globally there is a wide range of unions which are something beyond reformist, something beyond economistic, something beyond simply dividing the working class.

I find it strange at a NUMSA Political School, a union political school, which is dealing entirely with socialism and larger issues of strategy, and which is almost being driven entirely by union activists and intellectuals and associated people, a whole congress that isn’t being led by a party, to be debating whether unions are reformist and suggest unions are helpless without parties.

Right here, you are refuting Lenin through your actions. If Lenin’s argument is right, this Political School could not be happening. This could not be happening! This event is all an illusion. If unions are always reformist and economistic, and Lenin is right, well then maybe you are not even in this room. And if you are, you are wasting your time here. You get me?

But I don’t think it is an illusion... I think Lenin is simply wrong.

The refutation provided by the anarcho-syndicalist Spanish Revolution

Now let’s take this argument another way, which is to look at an example from history.

Where a trade union that did something that sets the bar on what unions can do. Seeing as we have spoken a bit about historical circumstances, I am going to mention a trade union federation that existed in Spain, one that was founded in 1910. This trade union in Spain, we will call it by its initials, the CNT.

The CNT means the “National Confederation of Labor,” and it was set up in Spain in 1910. It was by the mid-1930s, in Spain, the leading force in the working class. By that stage the CNT had organized nearly 2 million workers. Spain’s population at the time was round about 24 million. So if we want to put it into South African terms of today, in our own proportions, the CNT would be around 4 million strong.

It was a union in the Bakuninist tradition – that’s to say, in the anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist tradition. And the CNT did not confine itself to wages or to working conditions. Yes, it fought those fights. Fiercely. But it never stopped at dealing with those fights. It ran 36 newspapers and periodicals, 36 publications, including the biggest daily newspaper in much of Spain.

Comrade Solly is quite right, a large amount of the press is controlled by private capital in our country. You can go to a shop here, and what do you get? Capitalist media.

But what do *our* unions have in the way of mass media in South Africa? We have our internal union newspapers. But basically we wait for the capitalist press to print our press statements, and do what they like with them. Publicly we have nothing.

Well, the CNT produced its own newspapers. And these newspapers outsold and out-competed the capitalist and government newspapers. It had its own radio station and its own movies. In every single working class neighborhood where the CNT was strong, the CNT set up workers’ centers. These workers’ centers organized people, it gave a space where people could organize. These provided a space where the working class outside of the union was educated, including kids. Millions of people went through these centers. The CNT printed millions and millions of books and pamphlets.

And the CNT was a union which stressed direct action. It did not vote in elections. It *refused* to vote in elections. It did not ally to any political party. It said: “What do we need a political party for?” It out-competed, in the Spanish case, the Spanish Communist Party (PCE).

This party, PCE, claimed to lead the working class, to be its most revolutionary force – it was far less radical, and certainly far less popular, than the CNT. When CNT was reaching 2 million strong, the Spanish Communist Party was 10,000 strong. And this is the Marxist “vanguard” party. With 10,000 members! Well, workers didn’t believe it was the “vanguard” – they believed CNT was the vanguard, in the sense of being the leading radical force in the class.

Now the CNT built up over the years generations of anarchist/ syndicalist cadre. And it trained them through what it called “revolutionary gymnastics.” Does anybody here go to gym? A gymnasium, where you train.

Voice from the floor (joking): Comrade Irvin Jim goes to gym (laughter)

Lucien: Ah, there we go, you are saying comrade Jim goes to gym! Jim’s from the gym.

Floor: Laughter.

Lucien: Well, what the CNT did was, because they believed that the real power of the working class lay in its own action and its own resources and its own self-reliance, the CNT consistently tried to use direct action. This was the “gym” to train revolutionaries.

It didn’t use the courts or elections. It didn’t use the courts to try and stop evictions; it would rather stop the evictions physically; it would rather use a rent strike. If somebody in the union was assassinated by the state, it would... It would do what? Tell me what you think they did? They shot back, shot back. CNT developed its own military structures. The CNT worked inside the army as well, and built cells among the soldiers.

Now, these struggles, these experiences, these methods, were a “revolutionary gymnasium,” a training ground, a place where the working class could get stronger, and fitter, and trained for the

battle of the classes. Even a small wage struggle could, treated properly, be part of the training in the revolutionary gymnasium.

Now you can imagine that any state, any state, seeing a union like CNT emerging, would start to get quite alarmed. Spain in those days was attracting a lot of foreign investment. It was a country with a lot of poverty, a lot of unemployment, a lot of struggle. This sounds familiar to us as South Africans...

And the biggest mass movement was CNT.

In 1936 there was an attempt to make a military coup in Spain. The right wing of the ruling class was afraid that the CNT was going to make good on its promise of revolution. At the least, its struggles were a serious threat to the ruling class, and “revolution” wasn’t just a congress resolution by the CNT. At least three times, three times in the 1930s, the CNT organized armed uprisings.

This was a trade union federation, a revolutionary trade union. The Spanish ruling class did not take comfort in Lenin’s *What is to be Done?*, with its predictions that such a thing as the CNT was impossible. The CNT was doing this without being told what to do by a Communist Party. A revolutionary trade union, it had allies among youth structures; it had allies within community movements, allies among woman’s structures.

But it had no Communist Party that led it. It didn’t *need* it, didn’t *want* it, and it wasn’t worried about Lenin’s *What is to Be Done?* telling it that could not do what it was *actually doing*.

And the attempted military coup in 1936 was stopped by the CNT. When the army rose up, the CNT stopped it. It split the army; the army came over in large numbers to the CNT. The CNT brought out the guns that it had accumulated, and stopped the army that remained.

But they, the Bakuninists, the anarcho-syndicalists, didn’t just stop there. In Barcelona, in the province of Catalonia (which was sort of the “Gauteng” of Spain), the anarchist CNT trade unions took the factories and services. They ran them. They took over power stations, and they took over the car factories. I’m talking stuff that metal industry comrades here will recognize immediately. Car factories, power stations, tram yards... But also hospitals, restaurants, farming.

All of these were placed under workers’ control. And how were these run? They were run through the CNT. So essentially the weekly union meetings and democratic CNT structures that the CNT had always organized, say in the metal industry, became the structures which now governed the economy. So, the metal union became the basis for *bottom-up democratic control* of the metal industry, and through the CNT federation, was linked to the unions in all the other sectors. Together this provided a basis for democratic planning, in conjunction with working class communities.

So this wasn’t nationalization in which unions basically choose to replace an economic elite with a political elite: where you chose to replace the Oppenheimers with the Ramaphosas through the state. No. What they did is they *directly* controlled the economy.

The CNT’s shop steward structures became the committees that ran the factories. The weekly meeting of workers which mandated the shop stewards provided the basis of accountability and control. And with this power in their hands, they were able to reconstruct the Spanish economy. The same things happened in the countryside. And all in all, around about 10 million people were involved in these collectives and this “collectivization.”

Now, there is a point to this history, besides just a lot of history. The point is simply that there is no way that a union like CNT bears out the Leninist claim that unions by themselves are inherently reformist.

There is no way that anyone in the Spanish ruling class said “well thank goodness; Lenin said the CNT is reformist. Now we know. We are safe from these guys.” They called a military coup to try to stop the CNT instead.

Why couldn't the Spanish Communist Party gain traction? Because the CNT demonstrated in practice that it didn't need a vanguard. The union was enough. So why not a NUMSA on CNT lines?

An alternative to electoral politics

Now, I am *not* saying that every union can be revolutionary. But I am saying that with the correct ideology and with bottom-up CNT- (or NUMSA-) type structures a union CAN be revolutionary. It can play the political role that is usually taken by political parties. *And do it better.*

The last thing I will just say on this, Comrade Oupa, is this. The CNT didn't see revolutions as which party you vote for in elections. It didn't see revolution as who you vote for. It didn't see the options for the working class movement, as this party or that party, or this faction of that party, and this faction of that party.

It was quite clear, the state is an enemy. The state, by its nature, is part of the ruling class. The people you vote for join the ruling class. You can put the best man at the top, three years later, he will look like the man you threw out.

Floor: Laughter.

Lucien: The anarchist Bakunin said “You can take the reddest radical and put him on the throne of the Tsar, and within three years you will have a new Tsar.”

Floor: Laughter.

Lucien: Now because they had this politics, what they did was, rather than set up a party and vote for it, and then get disillusioned in elections, and then look for a new party or a new party leader to fix the mess, they understood why *elections don't work*. Not for the working class.

Elections, they argued, were a graveyard of politics. You send your best cadre into parliament, and they never come back!

Floor: Laughter and applause.

Solly: What I think Comrade Lucien is basically raising is that let's use the existing organization that we have, the materials that we have, and make sure that we deal with the kind of problems that we basically have. For me if the second option is to be taken, of course you've got to ask questions like “what forms of organizing this workers' party will be different from what we basically have in the SA Communist Party or in other vanguard parties that have been formed before?” What would the content be, what form should it take so that we don't reproduce some of the problems that you basically have?

But in the past, the enemy has always been the oppressive apartheid government and the capitalist system. But what is the enemy now? And also, we can also say the apartheid system also represented government. Is government our enemy today?

Floor: murmurs and comments “Yes!”

Solly: Well, we will respond to that. Is government our enemy today? Capitalism? Yes, it's our enemy. I don't think government is our enemy, today. Not the ANC government.

But of course, the Proudhonists and the Bakuninists speak to this particular question. The Proudhonists and the Bakuninists do not have a sense of the need for governments, or even a

sense of law. They do not even appreciate the trade union movement in its current perception. If you read Bakunin properly, or you read Proudhon properly... Proudhon actually is called the father of anarchy. He was the first one to be declared the father of anarchists, Joseph Proudhon.

So there is no sense of rules. There is the sense of the truest concept of liberty. But that has to do with the development of society itself. Now, have we reached that stage of development of society where we people can self-rule? Because under communism for instance, people will self-rule. There will be no need for a state for instance. Because the state carries with itself the oppressive apparatus and capacitance power of the people and in the universal name of the people.

But you cannot wish away the state for now. It's wishful thinking. But to debate the fact that there will be no need for the state in the future, as long as society evolves and develops to a particular level of consciousness, it's a correct position.

Floor: various comments to speakers and on other issues

Lucien: Okay, some of those comments are for Solly. Also, I am not going to respond to anything detailed about the current internal issues in the SA Communist Party. I've noted and appreciate many points, and I am going to go through them.

The problem with our Alliance politics

At the end of the day, if you are talking about what the political role of the trade union should be, the first thing you have got to start is knowing *what you want to achieve*. And to know what you want to achieve you have to know *what's wrong in a society*.

And if we look, and I think comrades have made it quite clear, South Africa is a society with a wide range of problems. And it isn't what we expected 19 years later after the 1994 elections and breakthrough.

In 1994, when the union-backed reform programme, the RDP, that is, the Reconstruction and Development Programme, came out a lot of people were debating, saying that "This thing is not very radical." Now, things have shifted so far, with neo-liberalism and privatization and so on, that at this stage, if you brought out the RDP people would think it was the Second Coming. It would be highly radical compared to what we have got now, even though it is not very radical in essence.

The question then, is how do we fix those problems? The problems we face as a country and as a class? You know, the first time you make a mistake, it's a shame but you can blame someone else. The second time you make a mistake, you've got no one else to blame for the mistake but yourself. And we must learn from the mistakes we make.

I think it's important to re-assess some of the political strategies that have been taken by the big battalions of the working class movement. And to think of what other options are available. And the point about what I said earlier about Spain and the CNT isn't to say that the way they did things is the only way that things have to be done. But it is to say this is one option. And a valuable one that pushes us out of Lenin's box, one we need to take seriously.

I think we need to have an open discussion about what are the possibilities for trade unions, and to do so with a wide range of experiences in mind. What are the different things that unions can do? Those things require us to start thinking "out of the box," to start to question the model that we've got today in the big unions, the model that holds the trade union is like a single person

that must get married, and married to a political party. A single person that has to get married with urgency, and always to a political party. And whichever party comes along with the best promises, this party takes it off to the church. With this sort of outlook, its no wonder that a range of political parties always come with promises to us unions; they know that trade unions are thinking like this: "I must get married."

Now, the marriage that was chosen in the end, for COSATU and so for NUMSA, was the marriage with the African National Congress (ANC). We speak now as if this marriage, the Tripartite Alliance, was inevitable, desirable and the best and most natural thing. And we speak, as we did this morning, as if we must just make the marriage work better. But what we forget is that this was a *choice*, a choice to start this marriage, and not an easy choice. Not even the obvious choice. That's why I say we should look at history, and also think "out of the box."

In fact, in 1993 NUMSA was looking at the issue of any alliance with the ANC very critically. It raised serious issues then and there. Twenty years ago NUMSA said the problem we face is, is that we might get a transition in which you end up with a bourgeois arrangement, with capitalism under the hegemony of a black nationalist movement which would not be able to deliver many of the things working class and poor people actually need, whether that is an improvement in their living conditions or whether that is issue of land ... that the elite would be blacker, and the black elite would grow, but the working class, mainly black, would still suffer.

The need for revolutionary unions

Now I think if you have to look objectively, that which was predicted by NUMSA then is the situation we face now. We got exactly the outcome that NUMSA warned against. You got exactly the outcome you were warned against. You chose to marry, and marry badly.

And in this particular juncture, which the marriage with the ANC perpetuates, it's not possible to make the deep-seated changes we need. Because the billions of rands needed for rolling out decent basic services everywhere are tied up with somebody rich and powerful, maybe white, maybe black, maybe politician, maybe businessman.

The decisions that are made are not made by working class people; those decisions are made by the rich and powerful. That is why you can see 36 billion rands spent on 2010 World Cup events here, and three years later, millions of people still have a bucket system for toilets. And the ANC and the state is a central pillar of this vicious system.

We need a fundamental change in how society is run. And to get that, I think, we need to re-evaluate what the unions can do to achieve this. And to see what the unions have got right and what the unions have got wrong. Well, you're married to a a big part of the problem. Now you need a permanent break, not marriage counselling.

The issue is not that anarchists, syndicalists like Bakunin were anti-union , as Solly seems to say. It is that they wanted the unions to be the best that they could be. And this requires revolutionary autonomy.

When we work from the assumption that the union must always be led by a party, like a Marxist vanguard party, I think we work from the wrong assumption.

You can have unions that are more revolutionary than a party, and you can have parties that are not very revolutionary.

Floor: Laughter.

Lucien: And just because you call yourself “revolutionary” does not make you revolutionary.

Floor: Agreement, calls of “yes” and “aha!”

Lucien: It is the objective actions that you undertake, including your political programme, that make you revolutionary.

Which is why when I started I said “Can we seriously be debating the question of whether trade unions can be revolutionary? Can we seriously be entertaining that debate?”

I don’t think that in South African history you will struggle to find unions that were reactionary, But you won’t struggle either to find revolutionary actions and leadership by unions.

Which is why I said this morning that if you looking for a way forward where are you looking? Look within. *Stop looking to the political parties and to the elections.*

Now, I know I sound like a bishop or a priest there! “Look within.” But there is something in this Political School that we must learn from... It is an example of how the unions, like NUMSA, are raising the main political challenges. But you can do much more.

Of course there are all these little parties that are popping up with an eye on getting on the gravy train through the next election, hoping they can get into office and make the money and get richer and richer. And hoping for union votes so they can get rich. But at the end of the day, those are not what’s worrying ruling class people at the top. That’s not what’s worrying those people. You, unions like you, NUMSA, are what’s worrying people in the ruling class. Trade unions are what worry the ruling class. That’s why there are campaigns against you at the moment.

So, yes, unions can be revolutionary and they can be *more* revolutionary than any party. And they can be revolutionary without a party. You, NUMSA, are doing that right now. So I think you need to think about a wider set of options than you have so far.

More revolutionary than the parties

And I think you need to get out of the mind-set that unions must be allied to a political party, and that this means the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and SA Communist Party. An Alliance that is often presented as natural and as the only way to go, but that, as Eddie Maloko was saying last night at the book launch for his revised history of the SA Communist Party, is really very recent. It’s very recent, and was always controversial for NUMSA.

A recent article in the SA Communist Party’s *African Communist* even spoke of celebrating “100 years” of the Alliance. This is just not true. COSATU *wasn’t* even in a formal political alliance before 1990. And FOSATU, the Federation of South African Trade Unions, the immediate federation before COSATU, *wasn’t* in an alliance with *any* political party. Actually, neither were the other big union federations in the 1980s. But they were political, they were radical...

If we want to go back in union history further, you will struggle to find any such three-part Alliance. You will not struggle, though, to find radical unions that were not allied to the ANC, or even the SA Communist Party, but that were very revolutionary.

We might want to look at the ICU in the 1920s and the 1930s, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, this was radical, even influenced by anarcho-syndicalism, and it *wasn’t* allied to political parties. The ICU unions planned to undertake land occupations. These were unions that mobilized tens of thousands of people in the countryside. These were trade unions that were seen (and you can look at the parliamentary debates from the times for this), they were seen as the threat. As a revolutionary threat.

No one was worried about the ANC then; the ANC was a few hundred people. Late 1920s, the ICU goes to the ANC and says will you join a general strike? And the ANC says: “No thanks.”

And now we sit here in 2013, 90 years later, and you say to the ANC will you do some serious redistribution of wealth and power? And they still say: “No thanks.”

So there is a consistent record where unions and other mass working class movements have shown that ability to raise, and fight around, radical issues. And a consistency in the inability of the ANC to undertake a range of serious measures essential to the working class.

Now my very last point on this is: when we look at a disease we have to know what is causing a disease, so that we can work at what the cure is. There is something in the political system of elections that means when trade unions back parties, the parties turn against them. ALWAYS. Here’s the illness.

That’s a fact. Somebody asked me about Brazil in a break earlier today: the comrade asked about Brazil under the Workers Party of Lula, the PT. Well, in Brazil we see the same story as here: a trade union movement emerges under authoritarian conditions, called the CUT, or the Unified Workers’ Central. It decides “No, oh gosh, we are not enough, we are not good enough, we need a political party.” It helps set up and allies to this new party, a political party called the PT. The CUT unions then say “this party needs a great leader.” “Let’s find a great leader” so they go to Lula. Lula is a CUT metal worker, but he is one of these men with incredible charm and presence, and people love him. And they elect him into government.

And in a year or two, it’s just like here. Just like here, you find neo-liberalism. Within a year or two, you find union leaders being swallowed into the state and then being turned against the unions. Within a year or two you find that all of those hopes that people had, they start to scale them down. Like the RDP here, which we criticized in the 1990s for being too moderate, but now we speak of as if it was a revolutionary programme.

Working class democracy

And eventually you end up happy just because you have the PT or the ANC and its leader in charge. Never mind the policy. Not because of any achievements. You are just happy when you are *consulted* about the policy that you don’t like, although the policy will go ahead, and your consultation means nothing really. Your standards keep dropping down on these things.

And that sort of sense of hope, in 1993 and 1994 where the people said the RDP was too lame, well, we now have a situation where the people think the RDP is the salvation. That’s what our COSATU policy proposals amount to anyway: just a revived RDP. That’s how far our standards have dropped. Socialism isn’t even on the agenda. No, we push for an RDP Mark 2, and we call this the Growth Path for Full Employment and think this is radical.

And in terms of method, we talk about land reform, and workers’ control, and decent work and job creation, and we look to the ruling party and the SA Communist Party and to the state, in which both the ANC and the SA Communist Party are so central.

But there’s no reason to think you are going to get any of this through this government, or any other. And not through the policy COSATU proposes.

Why don’t you just take some direct action and mass campaigns for these goals?

You are not going to this stuff through this government. It’s a capitalist government, it’s a capitalist state. Like any state, every state, it serves a small political and economic elite.

It’s not going to do what you want, it *can’t* do that. You can put the best people in charge, they *can’t* do it. It just can’t be done.

I spoke about a car this morning. A car can't fly. A car can't fly, a dog can't go "meow" and a cat can't go "woof."

Floor: Laughter

Solly: I want to say capitalism, yes, remains our primary enemy, of course it's not a secondary enemy. It has never been that secondary enemy, but remains our primary enemy. Every capitalist is an exploiter. We must fight them.

But in our situation we are involved in our revolution that we will call the National Democratic Revolution. The anarchists don't agree with it, the National Democratic Revolution. But this is what built the revolutionary movement that won democratic rights in 1994, under the banner of the National Democratic Revolution, the NDR. This had the political party leadership of the ANC and SACP.

We needed to deal with the legacy of the apartheid state. But there is the other key question there, which is class and class struggle, even in the Alliance, which is the basis of why the SA Communist Party is in this relationship with the ANC and COSATU. Because we want to see the ultimate end of class exploitation in this country, so we can have equality. But the road is through National Democratic Revolution and the ANC government.

And by the way, Bakunin himself, says he does not believe in the concept of equality. Bakunin didn't believe in the concept of equality because he believed that that particular concept when it arises in society that is organized around those issues of equality and so forth, it puts restrictions on freedom. So [anarchism] has got an idealist sense of freedom...

Lucien: Thanks Com. ... I think maybe we can just start with this slogan, which is emblazoned on the Political School's materials: "No revolutionary theory, no revolutionary movement."

But the question is, and what is a revolutionary theory? What is a revolutionary movement and what is a revolution?

The need for counterpower

The problem, and I think the burden of the working class, and the tragedy of the working class over the last 160 years, is that so many times *it has had power, or almost had power, and it has handed it over*. So many times working class people have built the mass structures that could govern society. Sometimes they have even started to govern society with this counterpower.

But the tragedy and the burden of our history as a class is that so many times we have stopped, and handed power over to leaders and to elites. And it seems every time we get there we say "oh no, hang on a minute, we need someone to tell us what to do." Power is handed over to economic and political elites, that is, to ruling classes, which then make their own deals and line their own pockets. Here's the cause of the illness.

We can look at our own country, our South Africa, in the 1990s. We moved from a situation in the 1980s and early 1990s where in many townships there was a large degree of community self-government through civics, and a big push for workers having a say in production through our powerful trade unions, and we moved to the CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa, 1991–1993) deal that we now complain about.

Steps needed for a class-based solution of the National Question

Now I think that CODESA deal that we got in 1993–1994 is a democratic breakthrough. It was a *huge advance*, a victory, and brought about real changes in the political and social situation, and important steps towards the resolution of the National Question.

But saying it's a breakthrough: that's not the same thing as saying it's a social revolution, even if we use the terms the SA Communist Party likes, like "National Democratic Revolution," or "NDR." Rather, 1993/1994 helps create *space* for a social revolution. It involved, on the one hand, major political and social reforms, but it also, on the other, involved an elite pact between the black political elite and the captains of white monopoly capital. It's a political revolution, not a *social* revolution.

A social revolution is when ordinary people take direct control in society. And we don't have that. We have more rights, but in a highly unequal society, where the National Question is not resolved for the black, Coloured and Indian working class – although the *black elite* has, on the other hand, been completely liberated. The 1993/1994 breakthrough was real, but it was also by its nature confined to the framework of class society, with the elite becoming blacker, but the masses staying exploited and impoverished despite having more rights. Unless we change this basic system, the National Question will never be resolved for the working class, since the material legacy of apartheid will remain, and so will the basic system of exploitation and competition, ... both breeding grounds for race and national conflict and populist demagogy.

Now, when we speak about NDR, you get some comrades talking about nationalization as a radical step for a radical NDR. But if we just think in terms of nationalization, we are missing a very basic thing. We talk about nationalization as a simple solution. But it only means the state is going to operate exactly the same way as the private capitalists. We talk about too often about "white monopoly capital" as the core controller of the economy and therefore as the main strategic enemy. It is a strategic enemy but NOT the only one.

But ruling class power is not just in the economy, it also vested in the state. And economic power is not just in the private sector; it is also vested in the state. Yes, in the ANC-run state apparatus.

Comrades need to realize that the state is the single biggest employer in South Africa. That's the state apparatus. The biggest land owner in South Africa is the state apparatus. The state extracts surplus value from its own workers, in its corporations like in ESKOM, in TRANSNET, in SAA, in the SABC, it has over 40% of capital assets and over 25% of land, and operates on the same logic of top-down elite rule as any corporation, as any private "monopoly capital."

So if you want to talk about and secure a situation that puts power into the hands of ordinary working class people, it doesn't do to move power from private monopoly capital to state monopoly capital, to replace private capitalism with state capitalism, and to do this in the name of revolution, to call something like this a "revolution." *You're just changing the bosses.*

And it *also* doesn't do to take power from your own mass movements and then hand it over to a political party. To give that party a blank cheque and then see it visit you for votes every five years. When every five years it will come to you and ask for your help, and gives you the reasons you should help it. And then for five years more you complain all over again, until it rebrands itself, it claims it fixes up the problems. That goes nowhere.

So yes, if you want a revolution, you need a revolutionary theory.

But in thinking about this, what comrades need to do is think seriously, not think sentimentally. Don't think sentimentally, don't base your judgement on emotions and the past. Nothing we say or do can take away some great things that the SA Communist Party has done in the past. We can think here, for example of its work in the unions in the 1940s and 1950s, and its armed struggle. Also the ANC, before 1994, did many great things. But that's *not* the same thing as saying that they are always right, that they have all the answers, and that we are in a perfect situation where you can never criticize any of those structures. Or the only option is to renegotiate the marriage with those structures. It's important to have a serious debate and to realize that our working class movement in South Africa, and also internationally, has never just been about one tradition, Marxism-Leninism, or about one tradition, nationalism.

These traditions are just positions in debates, not the only views possible, and not even necessarily the right views.

The early SA Communist Party itself, and you can go read Michael Harmel's official history, *Fifty Fighting Years*, had an anarcho-syndicalist wing. For many, many years, anarcho-syndicalism was an important current in the Communist Party itself.

So we mustn't look at political issues in sentimental terms, and cling to the notion that we are dealing, in the Alliance and the Party's current theory, with a perfect truth that came down from Mount Sinai like the Ten Commandments and that can never be questioned.

Revolutionary unions and movements, not party politics

In the 1980s the anti-apartheid struggle wasn't fought by parties, ... it was fought by mass movements. There was the United Democratic Front which brought together churches, community organizations, youth organizations, unemployed movements and various political organizations. It wasn't led by a party, even though it leaned one way. It worked alongside trade unions, like FOSATU and then later COSATU.

This was political action; this was political in profound ways. But the UDF was not the one who negotiated in the 1990s, that was the ANC, and this people's power and this type of politics was lost.

The ANC leadership came later, from exile in the 1990s when the job of struggle was done, and said "Well, we led the struggle. Well, we have the right to make decisions." They then closed down the UDF and they made an elite pact, they made a pact with white monopoly capital, at the same time as the important 1994 democratic breakthrough was happening.

We can talk all we like about "primary" and "secondary" enemies. But the current and ANC-headed state apparatus is *allied* to white monopoly capital. But it's not just a tool; it's not just a victim. It's an active participant. It is an *actor* in that situation, a strategic enemy in its own right, from the view of the anarcho-syndicalists at least.

The ruling class in South Africa has got two wings: it's got white monopoly capital based in the private sector, and it's got the black state elite, that is the state managers who are based in the state: they are wielding the state. The state controls 45 percent of fixed capital assets in South Africa. It is a major economic player: the state is the biggest employer in South Africa, it's the biggest land owner, and it has an army as well.

Who controls that? It's *not* white monopoly capital, in some sort of surreptitious way. *It's the black political elite*. White monopoly capital is working in *alliance* with this state elite because they have the same interests. But it's not just giving the orders.

What I am saying is: it's not like we have the situation where we have some sell-outs in the government who (if we change) will fight white monopoly capital. What we have is a situation where the black political elite allied to the white economic elite and around a common programme of neo-liberalism, and they are therefore united against the whole working class, including the black working class majority. And the ANC is embedded in this elite pact.

It's not a situation of a few bad apples; it's a situation of a tree that bears bad fruit. And you can give that tree fertilizer, like by voting, it just gets bigger.

Floor: Laughter and applause

Lucien: It gets bigger. And when the apples (the politicians) from that tree (the state) are picked, they can't understand why people go out and complain about how they taste. They think there must be something wrong with the consumers. And I mean here the working class public. They can't see what's rotten.

If I give you a rotten apple and the apple complains, who is to blame? If I give you a rotten apple do we expect the apple to say "Hey ,why does this guy not like me, what's wrong with him? Is he a counterrevolutionary?" No, no, no.

There is something wrong in that situation!

Floor: Laughter and applause

Solly: Comrade Lucien should actually indicate to you what happened to the Spanish workers. What happened to the workers? They were plunged into a civil war that actually killed more comrades, including international solidarity comrades who went to Spain on the side of the workers. Killed by the bourgeoisie. Because of what? recklessness in terms of tactics.

I feel that Com. Lucien is basically going almost to the level that says there is no need for political parties. Why then for instance, when workers took power in Spain, was this power stolen under the table by the bourgeoisie? This is a classic example. Because workers were not organized. And the bourgeois intelligentsia just came and stole a big number of workers' gains, which they won through blood. The Paris Commune is another example: the workers did not have a party, a Communist vanguard, and they were defeated and massacred.

And we can have similar situations, just because we want to ignore the realities. So these are fundamentals. [We must analyze the state, scientifically.]

Lucien: I agree with Comrade Solly on the need to analyze the state, and if I have created the impression that anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism and Bakuninism ignores the state, then I have created exactly the wrong impression.

Taking the state seriously: Outside and against it

[Anarcho-syndicalism] takes the state very seriously. It doesn't see the state as a "thing" out there, where you can just elect a few people and they will just change the system.

Anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism says that it is not the politicians who change the state. *Rather, it is the state that changes the politicians*. It is not the politicians who change the state; it is the state that changes the politicians.

Who would have thought in 1990 that Nelson Mandela would be the president when the ANC and the country's state adopted the neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR) in 1996? Who could have even imagined that?

We have to explain that scientifically. Marxist comrades keep talking about "material conditions." But the NDR strategy ends up with idealist approaches.

Well look, you put someone in charge of the state, a capitalist state, they have to keep capitalism going. Those are "material conditions." And they are not doing it for free either. Cyril Ramaphosa was a heroic leader of workers in the 1987 miners' strike, and now where is he? He is a billionaire who owns mining shares, including at Lonmin, where the Marikana massacre took place a year ago. And evidence shows he called on police to "deal" with those Marikana workers. A changed man!

You don't change the system by changing a few people; you change the situation by putting in another system.

States cannot be wielded by the working class.

You don't just keep changing the ingredients in a soup and think it's not soup. You've got to cook to a totally different recipe. As I was saying this morning, comrades, if a car doesn't fly, a car does not fly. You can paint it purple and it still wouldn't fly. You can call it the new model, it won't fly. The state, and this is the thing to think about from the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, is something which *cannot* be wielded by the working class. It *cannot* be wielded by the working class.

Either you elect a reformist party, and that party ends up, over time, being co-opted in to the ruling class, like the ANC, or a revolutionary party, like the Russian Bolsheviks, seizes state power.

But such a revolutionary party doesn't just seize power from capital; it also seizes power *from the working class*. And you can find, even as Comrade David on the panel was saying this morning, that your socialist party can, in fact, be the biggest enemy of the working class that you can get.

When you look at the situation of the Soviet Union, the heartland of Marxism-Leninism, comrades call that "socialism," people call that "socialism."

Well, comrades, that was a country with mass murder perpetrated by a Communist Party. That was a country with forced labor camps, with a pass law system and with no free trade unions. Why do you think the working class overthrew that system from 1989–1991? Why do you think a Communist Party can't get elected these days anywhere in Eastern Europe? Because people have had a Communist Party in power. They're fine, they're covered, they're *done* with such parties.

Comrade Solly makes the point that the Paris Commune was defeated and comrades: sadly that is true, it was defeated. But was that *because* it lacked a party? He makes the point that Spain 1936 was defeated. Was that because it lacked a party?

In Spain in 1936–1939, what Comrade Solly isn't mentioning, it was the Communist Party, the Spanish Communist Party, working with the bourgeoisie, that destroyed those anarcho-syndicalist collectives I was speaking about. It wasn't something out there called "the bourgeoisie," it was the Communist Party backed by Stalin and backed by the KGB secret police, that were working in concert with the bourgeoisie, that destroyed the Spanish revolution. Long before the right-wing military took over.

It's well documented. This isn't a matter of opinion. They, the Party, said it's "ultra-left" so unfortunately the "ultra-left" workers who were running society had to be put down. Put down like dogs.

The Soviet Union against the workers

Now where, where is this “vanguard” there? Where is the proof that you can only take power through a Marxist vanguard party?

No, the proof is something else entirely.

It’s not that if you’ve got a vanguard, the working class is guaranteed power. Very often the vanguard takes the power from the working class. Again, the parties are NOT the solution.

We can talk about the Soviet Union, and we can talk about the working class. as if the Soviet Union represented as state for and by the working class ... But what stops the “vanguard” party taking power from the working class? What stops the party taking power from the working class?

In the Soviet Union: this is exactly what happened. A Marxist party took power. It banned all the other parties. It crushed independent trade unions. A party of less than 1 million people in a country of 160 million established itself as the sole dictator. Within that party itself, even factions were banned.

You want to know where this tradition of destructive argument – where everyone is labelled an “agent” or a “counter-revolutionary” or a “traitor” for saying what the leaders don’t like, that we see today in the ANC, COSATU and the SA Communist Party – comes from? It comes straight from those Soviet experiences. These traditions of political thuggery we see? It comes from those experiences. This was the first of the Marxist governments, and it treated anyone with a different view as an enemy of the “revolution.” And the “revolution” was defined not by the mass of the people, but by a small cabal of leaders who said “we are the revolution, and if you are against us, you are counterrevolution.” Those are the traditions that we are stuck with, and struggling with...

This is not to say that Communist Parties worldwide didn’t play heroic roles. Communist Parties often did play heroic roles. It’s not to say that people in Communist Parties were doing it with a hidden motive. It’s just to say that certain methods of changing society create new problems. If your method of changing society is to seize state power, you will end up with rule by an elite, maybe a new elite, but an elite.

And if your method of thinking is “we are the vanguard, everybody else is a counterrevolutionary,” you will end up with a dictatorship against everybody else if you ever get state power

And if your method of politics is like that even in your own organizations, so that factions are illegal or driven out, you will be an organization that doesn’t tolerate any debate. That doesn’t tolerate democracy. An organization that cannot be compatible with working-class democracy, because it does not tolerate *any* democracy. Again, the parties are NOT the solution.

So what I am really getting at with all of this is: we can’t just look at these things outside history and talk as if Marxism and Leninism came up with this perfect model, and a perfect set of solutions, as if there weren’t a third of the world run by Marxist-Leninist parties. Marxist-Leninist parties took power.

Yes, the big Communist Parties were superior in a basic way to the Trotskyite parties in that they achieved their goal, state power, unlike the Trotskyites, which never manage to take power. But in taking power *those Marxist-Leninist parties took the power for themselves*. It wasn’t the working class that took power. You can go to China now, it’s under Communist Party rule: go ask those workers if they have trade unions. Go ask them. They don’t.

So, now, I agree that you need to deal with the fact of political unevenness in the working class, and need to overcome the fractures in the class. But a vanguard Communist Party; it's not the only way to solve these issues, or even the best way. Of course Communist Parties can play an important role; radical political organizations can play an important role, and they don't even have to be political parties: in the CNT, anarchists organized a Bakuninist political organization, the Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI), to promote anarchism/syndicalism.

But so can unions. So can unions. I don't see any reason why a union like NUMSA can't go out and form alliances with other sections of the working class. Can't be present in service delivery protests. I don't see why not. I don't see why NUMSA can't run political education for non-NUMSA members. I don't see why not. I don't see why a renewed COSATU that takes a new approach can't provide the foundation, can't provide a pole of attraction, for a new oppositional anti-capitalist, democratic bottom-up socialist movement.

And what I am getting at is, with this we need to rethink how we pose these things. The parties are NOT the solution, but part of the problem the working class faces.

Confusions on the state

Meanwhile, our SA Communist Party comrades are getting confused. They talk as if the state is a neutral entity which is only *sometimes* against the working class. And then they also talk about Marxism and Leninism but that says something totally different, that the capitalist state, is anti-working class; that is what Lenin himself said. And then they try to put these two contradictory political things together: being in an alliance with a capitalist ANC which uses the capitalist state, and then also calling themselves Marxist-Leninists. They want have the cake and eat the cake at the same time. If you agree with Marxism-Leninism, this is a capitalist state and no amount of changing the people at the top will make any difference. But then you get told: "No, vote for the ANC, that's the way." This makes no sense.

But the problem is even bigger; it's a problem in Marxist theory itself. Marxist materialism says the economic "base" determines the political "superstructure." Marxist materialism says the "superstructure" includes the state. But then Marxism often says something illogical: use the state to change society. The revolutionary strategy boils down to setting up a so-called "workers' state," a "dictatorship of the proletariat," to change the base, a state to abolish capitalism. This is no different in essence from trying to use a capitalist state to change society; in both cases, the idea is that the state is the motor of change

Now isn't it illogical in Marx's own terms to say we can capture the state and change the "base"? If the "base" determines the "superstructure" and it is a capitalist base, you cannot change that base using the state. That's a really idealistic approach; the anarchist Bakunin was not an idealist like this. He saw this contradiction. So, you certainly can't use a capitalist state to bring about socialism if you accept the theoretical basics of Marxism itself. But that's what Marxist political strategy demands! And that's what the whole NDR idea involves too.

A more sensible approach may be this: if you study anarcho-syndicalism, it's argued that the state is allied to capital and it can't break that alliance. It is an unbreakable marriage. They have a common interest. The state needs the capitalist to pay taxes; the capitalists need the state to shoot people, crudely speaking.

Okay, now, if this is the case how do you move forward? And this is where I am going to start pulling this input together.

A strategy for a bottom-up anarcho-syndicalist socialist transition

The working class needs a theory and it needs to translate that into a strategy for *deep change*.

You need a strategy and you need tactics. Comrade Oupa was saying that you need something appropriate to South Africa. Well, to have a strategy you have got to have a vision where you want to go. To have a vision of where you want to go, you have to know what is wrong in society. And you have to look at specific societies closely.

Fundamentally what anarcho-syndicalism argues is that what is wrong with society is that a small elite runs society. But it's not just an economic elite, it is also a *political* elite. So as long as an elite runs society it will run society by the elite, for the elite and the state leadership will be of the elite.

And this is part of a whole society, based on exploitation and domination, on top-down power relations, in inequality, inequity, exploitation and suffering, a society where the National Question cannot be fully answered...

Comrade Solly said that Bakunin ignored inequality; that is just not true... The anarchists insisted that all relations of oppression, by gender, by race, by class, by nation, come to an end. That includes the oppression meted out by the capitalists and politicians against the working class. But it also means resolving the National Question in a progressive, working-class way, and it also means fighting for complete gender equality, including in our own movements, and aiming at getting rid all elites, black or white...

For the anarchists, the only way out of this endless circle of “vote for that party, vote for this party, vote for that party and never get anywhere” is if you actually remove that system.

Where you can create a democracy that is bottom-up, based on workers' collectives, the socialization of production, that is based on an educated population that understands its rights and understands how to run things, that is based on human need before profit, that gets rid of the commodity form entirely, that gets rid of the market but also does not replace it with a central plan and a central dictatorship, but with bottom-up plans... Well, there is nothing idealistic here, we are talking about a working class democracy, about a free socialist society, the aim and vision of anarcho-syndicalists.

Now, if you want that world you have to build a type of movement that does two things. An anarchist/syndicalist movement, first that builds counter power in the working class, that builds institutions in the working class that can govern society. Not institutions that hand power over to politicians, but working class institutions that will *themselves* take power – first and foremost revolutionary trade unions. But also organizations in other sectors, including working-class communities.

Organizations that are the *embryo* of the new society, organizations that *build tomorrow today*, within the shell of the old society. Organizations that resist ruling class power now, with working class counterpower, that build to eventually themselves directly *replace* ruling class power with working class power.

So: counter power. A CNT- or NUMSA-type union is key here.

Secondly, you need a revolutionary counter-culture which is a radical mass consciousness. It's a mass consciousness that understands what is wrong in society and how to fix it. A consciousness that tells people we are in a class-divided society. You can vote for Helen Zille of the Democratic Alliance, you can vote for Jacob Zuma of the ANC. But those are just different wings of the same upper class. That the solution isn't that empty choice, it is to build something else, new.

A position that says society needs to be based on grassroots democracy, on a democratically planned participatory economy, based on distribution according to need, based on common property, and without a state elite and without a business elite.

And to get that society, to reiterate, for anarchists, for anarcho-syndicalists, for Bakuninists, you need to build counter power: the organizational forms that prefigure the new society. Those are the seeds of the new society.

And the ideological forms that need to become hegemonic within the working class: those are the ideological forms of the new world in the making, that is revolutionary counter-culture.

The aim is not the rule of a political party that is supposedly revolutionary, but a revolutionary *working class*, with revolutionary ideas promoted by FAI-type and CNT-type structures, that the working class can directly implement, through its organizations.

Now the *tactics* to build such a project are a separate matter. I have laid out a strategy, I have laid out an aim and I have laid out an analysis. The tactics, what you would need to do in a given situation – that is not a simple thing of just sucking it out of your thumb. You would need to think very concretely how you would build such a project. You would need to think about how you lay the basis for a CNT and FAI in South Africa.

I'm not saying anyone *has* to build it, I am saying you should think about if you want to build it. Need revolutionary theory? That's fine, what is your revolutionary theory then? If you agree with a certain theory, you need different tactics at different times. That needs a whole other discussion and a whole other afternoon. But I have given the elements of an anarcho-syndicalist approach, and the case against our current trajectory as unions....

Now I think with that I can leave most of the remaining things raised aside. I would like to thank NUMSA for giving me this opportunity here. And I would like to thank all of you for participating in a larger discussion over these days that allows us to recover the memory of our own class, the different political traditions of our own class that are very diverse and rich and provide an armory of intellectual and ideological tools for struggle. Because when I talk about anarcho-syndicalism, I am not talking about something new, something alien. I am talking about *recovering and activating the collective memory of our own class*, the political traditions of our own class, arming ourselves from the armory of intellectual and ideological tools of and for the working class.

Okay. Thank you!

Floor: sustained applause

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Lucien van der Walt
Anarcho-syndicalism for South African unions today
Speech to Metalworkers
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