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Saving jobs in South Africa in the crunch

'Engage' or Revolt?

Lucien van der Walt

April 20, 2009

One of the great weaknesses of SA unions – or at least their leaders – is the notion that unions should actively aim at restructuring the economy through policy engagement. This idea is often labelled 'strategic unionism' or 'radical reform', and centres on a politics of cooperating with capital and the state to effectively restructure "South African" industry for global competition. This is summed up in the phrase that "business is too important to leave to management".

The same idea – the so-called "progressive competitive alternative" – rests on the belief that there is a working-class-friendly "high road" to the global economy (in contrast with the low-wage-high repression "low road" of China et al, the idea here is workers via unions can suggest ways to restructure that will lead to high wages, job security and co-determination). It can be seen in the abortive (union-initiated) Reconstruction and Development Programme of the early 1990s, the unions' follow-up, "Social Equity and Job Creation", in the more recent "Sector Job Summits" process, and the recent presidential

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Retrieved on 25th June 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

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meetings on the global crisis. It is at the heart of COSATU's deep commitment to – indeed, entanglement in – NEDLAC and other corporatist structures.

The disgraceful record of the economy over the last four decades no doubt fosters the notion that “business is too important to leave to management”, but (in claiming the problem is “management” rather than the system and its ruling class, or is “bad” capitalism rather than “good” efficient capitalism) it draws exactly the wrong conclusions (unions effectively seeking to manage exploitation, rather than abolish it). If the economy is “too important to leave to management”, why collaborate with that management? Why try and fix its problems? Why not, in short, fight to dethrone it permanently through working class counter-power?

The problems with the unions' approach are obvious:

- centralisation and bureaucratisation: policy engagement of this sort generates within the unions a need for a layer of highly trained technocrats, and shifts focus from militant struggle (by the grassroots) to technical talks about “policy” (by the technocrats and their state and capital equivalents). It pushes union leaders and advisors into what the syndicalist De Leon called the role of “labour lieutenants of the capitalist class”
- This danger is usually neglected by the advocates of strategic unionism, who tend to stress the importance of developing research and policy “capacity” and “balancing” union democracy and policy -n rather than seeing an inherent contradiction between a technocratic approach and a class-struggle approach.
- Political crippling: in taking (or seeking to take) co-responsibility for the existing system, which is anti-working class, the unions (as movements of the working class) find themselves caught in an impossible

situation (trying to govern yet also fight the system), while embracing its logic (competition, nationalism, wage labour, market relations etc.) and agreeing to ruinous compromises (in the metal industry, for example, such ‘strategic unionism’ is usually tied to productivity agreements and 3-year no-strike agreements)

- Within the existing system, given static or declining markets, increased productivity is a sure route to job losses (showing the bosses how to improve productivity is a sure way to lose jobs and union members),
- The logic of the system (both state-logic and capital-logic) will continually drive it against the working class (competition etc, must pit workers against each other, while the processes of the system will continually generate impoverishment, instability and the exploitation and domination of human over human), and in the context, the drive to co-determination will surely be nothing but a means of ensuring the unions cannot fight — and fight hard — against the inevitable offensives of the ruling classes
- “Evidence” for the viability of “strategic unionism” is typically drawn from the supposed examples of the Nordic social democratic systems of the 1930s-1970s. Drawing such parallels assumes capitalism can be transformed by simple policy interventions.
- The fact of the matter is that Nordic social-democracy (and the Keynesian welfare state more generally) arose in specific circumstances that are not replicated in the current conjuncture: a) high levels of class struggle (including the real possibility of revolutionary upheavals across Europe — forcing compromise by the ruling class) b) an unprecedented boom (the “golden age” of capital-

ism, which helped fund reforms without jeopardising the system) c) ideologically, state intervention was widely accepted (as opposed to the neo-liberal era) and d) location within or at least adjacent to the highly industrialised centres of the world economy (where productivity was such that rapidly rising exploitation could in some circumstances be reconciled with real improvements in income). None of these conditions apply in SA — nor indeed anymore to Sweden et al.

- So, militant abstention based on direct action would seem a more sophisticated and sure policy than ‘strategic unionism’, which is neither strategic nor wise for unions
- In general, militant class-struggle action will be more successful (at building consciousness and organisation AND winning or defending gains) than a naive top-down “engagement” that entangles unions in the machinery of a system their class does not control, and cripples their fighting power, which rests on mass action at the point of production
- This need not mean ignoring policy changes — for example, in welfare — that could seriously affect the working class. The point is HOW such issues should be dealt with — elsewhere I have tried to map out a road to shaping policy in favour of the working class through direct action, a militant “engagement” from below that refuses to sacrifice democracy, militancy or class combat.

Current struggles demonstrate there is a serious alternative means to save jobs as the crisis bites: occupation and the *refusal to be retrenched*. This model, seen spectacularly in action in the heroic and for the time successful occupations struggles at the Daewoo plants — and general strikes — in South Korea in 2001,

is again on the agenda, as the following report from France shows: such measures are not a complete solution — more a holding action and a training ground for the key task of *taking and holding the factories* — but absolutely vital.