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Lucien van der Walt

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This is a lightly edited transcription of a talk given by Prof. Lucien van der Walt on a panel on the eve of the 2019 national elections in South Africa: the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG)/ Workers World Media Productions (WWMP) Public Forum, Isivivana Centre, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa 25 April.

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THANK YOU comrades for the points that you have made. Should anti-capitalists vote? The quick answer is “no.” Let’s be clear, the right to vote is important. It is better to be under a state where you can vote, where there are some basic civil and political rights, than under, for example, the apartheid state that we had. It is not that there is no difference — it is big victory for the working class that we’re under a bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

Having said that, using the state and using elections is not something that is going to take the working class forward, it is not something that is going to enable the working class to build the capacity to take power directly by itself, through bottom-up organs of working class democracy.

Let’s be clear: this isn’t an argument about whether comrades are sincere in their programmes when forming parties, it is not an argument that genuine comrades who believe in the party model secretly have malicious plans to get rich. We know that there are many politicians who are in it to get money, but not all.

So this is a message to the sincere comrades, of the left.

Fundamentally the state is not an organization that is able to ensure the deeper change, the creation of social and economic equality which we need in our country and in our society. The state is a top-down, centralised pyramid in the hands of a political elite of politicians, and of top government officials, who work with an economic elite, of big business people. Together this is the ruling class, a powerful minority that controls society, and monopolizes power and wealth through states and corporations.

We can have formal political and civil rights, but in the context of deep, profound, immiserating inequality in power and wealth, those rights are very limited. We all have the right to free speech but one person, sleeping under a bridge, and another person, the editor of a newspaper — well, one person's right to free speech and another person's right to free speech, can be completely different in reality. If you are desperately dependent on an employer to survive, to get a small amount of money, so that you can feed your kids, you are not likely to cause trouble and invoke your formal rights as a worker.

So, for the proper exercise of rights, you need equality in society — not just to be equal on paper. To that end we need a massive redistribution of power and wealth in society: we need to move away from a society in which run by, and for, a small ruling class of politicians, officials and capitalists.

As a simple example, to get decent housing in South Africa, we would have to spend billions of rands, we would have to redirect the construction industry away from producing shopping malls, from suburban houses, gentrified coffee shops and craft beer saloons. We would have to control the resources — the labour, the materials, the infrastructure — and we would have to have the power to decide that those resources go into housing — rather than something else.

Then we can start to talk about the large-scale delivery of decent housing for ordinary people. I don't mean a little shacks, I don't mean the tiny two room houses the state provides when pressured.

FROM FLOOR: Viva!

I am talking about housing where you can live in dignity, where, essentially we abolish the township system of large, segregated, impoverished working class districts, under-serviced, badly maintained, ill-treated, and sharply distinct from the suburbs. A massive redistribution of power and wealth enables us to move away from that system, and create unified towns — not bigger townships, but the end of townships by making the townships suburbs.

Now, that requires some massive redistribution of wealth and power — and direct control by ordinary people. And you will never get that by getting a piece of paper in a box every five years and hoping some politician will carry out their promises.

Comrade Zama Timbela, on my left, of the Progressive Civic Movement, was quite clear and totally correct: we have tried, and we are not the only ones who have tried. Many, many people have tried this. People much better than me have tried. If someone like Nelson Mandela couldn't change the system, if pretty much anyone you care to name ended up producing that same inequality in society, why is it going to be different this time? How many more times do we have to form and support parties, and watch them fail the working class?

You cannot with the best will in the world make a car fly. It is the nature of the thing. You cannot make a dog go “meow.” You cannot take a state, which has got a very specific purpose in society — keeping the ruling class on top — and make it do something different.

I understand comrades' argument that we want to use the state, and parliament, and elections, to make propaganda — and there we agree. But we disagree on how.

This comes down to how we analyse the state. The nature of the state is twofold. One, it is about the defence of inequality in society. Adam Smith, the famous liberal economist said, the wealthy, could not sleep peacefully at night unless there was an armed body,

which could protect them: the state. The state's role is to maintain the status quo.

FROM FLOOR: Thank you!

Second, the state serves is controlled directly by that ruling class, and the ruling class is not just capitalists in the private sector. The ruling class includes those people who control the army, the police, the parliamentarians, the mayor, the vice chancellor -those are all part of the ruling class and they have some disagreements, how much cattle or cash must this one pay to this one in a bribe, who gets a contract from ESKOM for coal, how much tax must be paid, how best to control and exploit the working class.

But all these differences fall aside when it comes to basic things. If you want to occupy some land for a shack, you are going to face evictions, jail. The union comrades will know that when you go on strike, the police will be there — not to arrest the bosses, but to police you. On strike you can be beaten, you will not get paid, you will get killed in some cases. On the other side, you could be like Marcus Jooste, and defraud people of nearly R40 billion, or like Jacob Zuma and be involved in “state capture” scams that amount to an estimated R100 billion, and you will not be arrested, evicted, or jailed. You will have to testify in parliament, maybe, and then you can go home to your mansion. You can loot ESKOM so much, that South Africa now has less electricity than it did in 2009, and all you will face is a toothless commission.

So, on one side, simply by maintaining the status quo of inequality, powerful monopoly corporations, deeply entrenched inequality in decision-making and income and resources across society, including in the state — the household of the former president, Zuma, cost tax payers up to R500 million, while people in expanded public works earn less than R20 an hour — the state ensures the current system goes on.

And, on the other side, the state is an apparatus for the direct accumulation of wealth and power. Senior state office, whether national, provincial or local, gives access to state resources. High

party road has failed, we need to build organs of counter-power and a project of revolutionary counter-culture. Thanks!

APPLAUSE.

perspectives. Let's be willing to change our minds and learn from one another. Let us not pretend there aren't differences; differences matter. It should not be a precondition of joining a mass organisation that we support a particular party. And let us not exclude any party either.

This is part of building a counter-power, of mass-based organs of counter-power to resist in the present, and build capacities to take over in the future. We need to rebuild an alternative media and radical education. Today union investment firms hold major shares in Power FM, eTV and other broadcasters, yet these do nothing to promote working class hegemony or socialism or anarchism. We need to have a discussion on how to relink Unions and community. We need to think about ways that unions, and communities, have created alternatives in the past. Unions used the run, here in Cape Town, the Ray Alexander Workers Clinic. Why not revive such things? If the state has failed with public health, let's start asking the state to deliver public health, let's have our own clinics. Let's get workers' radio and TV going — not just a slot here and there, but as part of a systematic alternative. Let's get the big battalions of the working class onto building alternative institutions.

Let's rebuild worker/ community alliances and fundamentally let's find ways to unite the exploited and oppressed, who are pitted against each other, every day: Coloured versus black versus white, South African versus foreign. And to unite people we have to fight the oppression amongst ourselves. Not as something after the revolution but as a precondition to unity now. But, we also have to understand that without a fundamental change in society, and a new system of equality and freedom, we are not going to tear up the roots of women's oppression, of racism, of anti-immigrant ideas.

So, build alternative institutions that educate, organize people and build an alternative at a distance from the state. If you want democracy, make it. Build it now. Parliament is not democracy, the

salaries and perks — more than a million rand a year, a house, flights, free airtime just to sit in parliament — and even more — access to big money through the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) and state banks, giant state capitalist firms like ESKOM, and thousands of opportunities for graft through state contracts and outsourcing, all the way down. The Eastern Cape province has tens of thousands of “procurement points”; a municipality can have up to a thousand contracts with the private sector. State power means you can give those contracts to family, friends, fronts: then you, the politician, are sorted. And this is, sadly, what a lot of political party activity in South Africa is all about. Not the people, the politicians.

Votes are not going to change the system. Voting is not going to change the system. Major decisions are completely outside of the control of ordinary people on a day-to-day basis. It is better to have a non-racial parliament than P.W. Botha, but parliament is not democracy. It is a shell covering something else. Look on TV at parliament, watch the shenanigans of overpaid politicians, earning a million rand a year, wearing overalls or Gucci suits — I don't care which — as they posture, parade and make speeches! These are rich, powerful people; they are not there for you, they are doing a job where you do not even get fined if you never come to work.

If you think they really represent you, then think about what they really do. At elections they talk to you and promise the world, but you will see, sooner or later, what world you will get. We never voted for privatization in 1994, but we got it. We never voted for police to be sent onto our campuses, we got it. We never voted for a job-loss bloodbath, we got it. We never voted for the “state capture” project, we got it.

And this isn't a question of which particular party — I want to be clear — this is not a question of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), or the rival, conservative Democratic Alliance (DA, which rules here in Cape Town) or the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an ANC breakaway that talks about socialism but has allied with DA all over the country. The DA evicts people, the

ANC complains. The ANC evicts people, the DA complains. EFF, well it will evict people all on its own, if it ever had direct control of a municipality – and in fact it has served for years in municipal coalition governments with the DA, and so, been party to DA evicting people.

It is not a question of which party. We also need to get away from the thing that the problem is a few bad apples, a few bad people that we solve it if we replace Mbeki with Zuma, and Zuma with Ramaphosa, in the ANC, or Malema from EFF, or Maimane from DA – it does not matter.

This is where the idea of running a party to use elections for tactical reasons is a mistake. Yes, the masses do look at elections: but why not give them a different message? Why tell people to vote for a party, to expose the system, as if that does not teach people to trust the system? Yes, the political temperature of the working class rises at elections, but why give the message “vote” if know voting is based on an illusion in the state? That is creating illusions.

Yes, comrades, I recognize the new Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, linked to the left-wing National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), wants a “dictatorship of the proletariat” and so on – and states that it does not believe in a parliamentary road to socialism. I know the party says it’s running in elections for tactical reasons, mainly to make propaganda. But the reality is that most people outside the party cadre will and do think the party is promising to deliver more and better, and that the issues is just that the state is run by the wrong party.

Yes, you can use parliament for propaganda, the EFF showed it brilliantly – brilliantly! They made parliament interesting to watch. In the old days it wasn’t interesting to watch, unless you were having trouble sleeping and then you could take tips from the people in parliament.

But fundamentally that does nothing to build a bottom-up movement, it makes people into spectators at a show, politics into a performance by a few leaders. And, fundamentally the use of parties in

call this strategy. Likewise, I feel solidarity the people of Cuba, against the United States embargo, but I have no solidarity with the Cuban regime or the not Castro family.

A free society is one without social and economic inequality – a society in which ordinary people are in charge. In fact “ordinary people” in such a society are no longer “ordinary people” at all, since there is no elite against which we contrast the masses, the grassroots. There are no classes. We are all collectively owners of means of production, and we all collectively decide on how we use administrative, coercive and economic resources. We are in charge of schools, work and the community, and we can live lives of dignity and equality. We govern through assemblies, committees and councils, from the bottom up, with no ruling class minority. We have freedom of speech and association and belief, and we have equality through cooperation and community.

That means the abolition of the state. None of this is possible through, or under, a state structure. That also means the capitalism. While we live under systems which are pyramids, where a small ruling class holds the power and wealth, we will never be free. The masses cannot control a pyramid which is a way for a minority to centralise resources and decisions. You can vote how you like, but you do not control the MPs or the president, you can have a bank account but you do not control the bank. You can tweet President Ramaphosa, or write him an open letter, but he does not have the read it, and he does not have to do anything about it. That is the nature of the empty democracy we have.

You have to have substantial direct control. And that means that at the end of the day we have got to think how the working class can get some power today, and prepare for taking power directly in the future. We need permanent mass organizations in which we can debate the various perspectives, such as unions, neighbourhood groups, and unemployed organisations. I am against putting our faith in parties, but let’s have political pluralism in mass organisations, and hammer out the issues. Let’s test our different

lutionary Workers Party, are raising the issues of a bigger project that builds on, but goes way beyond, immediate struggles. Because, ultimately, we need to be clear about what is wrong in society now, what our end goal of a new type of society is, and how we get from one to the other.

Comrade Ebrahim Fourie, on the panel, representing the Housing Assembly, is right that we need to be clear on words. Just to say that our end goal is “socialism” is too vague, as he notes. What does that mean? How do we get there? We need to engage theory, and history does matter; we cannot just say we’re now in the 21st century, everything is new, and the past is dead. We need — as different socialist currents — to look at what we did wrong in the past and right as well.

Comrades have labelled me an “anarchist” ...

CROWD: Laughter.

But it’s a label I embrace! I am arguing for exactly that, anarchism and syndicalism: at the end of the day we need to be thinking about how the working class, and the popular classes more generally, can take power directly, and not keeping handing power over to others. If we reject capitalism, and if we reject the state, if we agree that handing power to politicians and parties has failed — and failed it has, comrades, make no mistake, there is not one successful example of this freeing the masses — then we need to build mass organisations that can fight in the present and replace capital and state in the future. So we must always draw a clear class-based distinction between the people of a country, and its ruling classes, and stay steadfast in being politically independent of the state, just as we are separate from the private corporations.

I appreciate that many comrades here feel solidarity with Venezuela, and so do I, since I oppose imperialist interventions. But I feel solidarity with the popular classes of Venezuela, not its regime. I feel solidarity with the people against both the United States government, and the Venezuelan government, both of which oppress the people. I do not choose between enemies and

elections, whatever the aims, is a method that sows illusions in the state. The idea that the masses must be encouraged to vote, so they can learn the hard lessons, is irresponsible. If you have a child and they burn their hand, they learn a lesson. But you don’t encourage them to burn their hand so they can be learn the lesson: you say “don’t burn your hand, don’t touch the fire!” The same thing with elections.

To sum up: you are not going to change the system with a piece of paper; if you want to vote, vote, that is your right; but it’s not going to change things. If people want to set up a party, good for them. And I respect the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party for at least putting a radical platform out there. But it is still not going to solve the problems.

First, political parties don’t change the state, the state changes political parties; people change. High salaries, access to contracts, and the exercise of power — these things change people. We cannot pretend someone from the working class, now suddenly rich, and busy running the state, is still working class in interest, experience or outlook.

Rather than political parties being the power of the people inside the state, they actually become the power of the state inside the working class, using networks of patronage, providing access for a select few to escape the working class and move into the elite, corrupting and capturing the leadership of working class movements including unions, and teaching the masses to have faith in the state — an organisation that oppresses them.

The party system generates divisions in the working class, as politicians chase votes: in South Africa, it’s perfectly clear that race tensions are inflamed by the parties. The party system creates a culture of dependency on the state: “we want the state to deliver, give us this, give us that.” People are left passive, disempowered from decisions, only briefly emerging in voting and —sometimes— in protests. The rest of the time, they have no control over their daily lives. The party system promotes a Moses syndrome: people

are taught to wait for a Moses to bring freedom to take them to the land of Canaan. But none of these politicians is Moses, and there is no Canaan to be found in following them. In electing them, you are putting them in a land of milk and honey you will never enter.

If no state can really make a difference, and I include the so-called socialist states, which were class societies based on state-capitalism, if no state has put the working class, the poor, the peasants in power, then we need to think of a way that ordinary people can take power without the state. We need a politics at a distance from the state, we need to build organs of people's power and of workers' control, that in the current period can defend the working class — and that can develop the capacities for the people to take over, directly, themselves, without the state.

Second, rejecting the use of the vote is not rejecting democracy, but fighting for democracy: parliament is not democracy, so if you want democracy you need to build it outside the state.

Comrade Mandisi Vatu, from the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party: we have had this discussion before, so I am happy to meet you on this panel again. And I still ask: why does NUMSA want to put their faith into a party? What does a party add? Why doesn't NUMSA prepare its members to seize and occupy and run the metal industry? You have 350 000 people, you have structures of workers' control, so expand the workers' democracy, from your structures outwards. The older unions, in the 1980s, argued that workers' control of the unions should be expanded into workers' control of the economy and we should get back to that. A large section of the anti-apartheid movement aimed to replace apartheid state structures with organs of people's power, where civic organisations would take power in the townships. We should get back to that. Why outsource to a party, when a party cannot do these jobs, and when the state is the enemy?

What we have to do is organize and educate people and what that means is organizing people bottom up, to struggle, bottom-up to empower their daily lives, bottom up so they can actually have

democracy. You will not have democracy with the state, but you can get it with your neighbours. You can get it with your work-mates. And you can build in that a seed of a democracy where people redistribute wealth and power downwards — that is exactly what I mean. Society based on assemblies, community and worker councils that can plan the economy democratic.

FROM FLOOR: Viva!

Organise outside the state. The state is part of the problem. It is not the solution! The problem is not the capitalists, somewhere out there, that the state will sort out, that the state will serve the people. The state and the capitalists are two parts of the same, basic system.

We cannot get away from theory and ideology here. The comrade from the floor who raised the question of the importance of a programme is correct: yes, we need to have ideas and we need to think about how we link struggles today to deeper changes tomorrow, we need to think practically without getting stuck in reformism. And this is where theory comes in.

Struggle just isn't enough. We saw this with the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, where people rebelled to demand parliamentary democracy. Just that. And what we saw is that, if we don't have direction, you get pushed back or moved aside, and lose out. In Egypt, the masses overthrew the military regime, and got elections to parliament. A far-right party, the Muslim Brotherhood, was the main force ready to take the gap. It won the elections and was so reactionary, killing opponents, terrorising minorities like the Christians, that millions of people breathed a sigh of relief when the military seized power again. They were back to square one. It is nonsense to think that struggle alone is enough, or even to pretend that struggle automatically takes us towards socialism and democracy. It does not and it cannot.

So, it is not enough just to struggle: we need to link daily struggle systematically towards a larger program of changing society. This is why I am glad that the comrades here, from the Socialist Revo-