

Working Class Struggle, Blazing a Path to Freedom

Talk by Lucien van der Walt at 24 Sept 2012, Heritage Day event, Joza Township, Grahamstown

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Thank you all for coming. Thank you, chair, for the invitation. Thank you, organisers, for the event today. Today looks like a great day, a great day to look forward.

But before we look forward, we must look back as well. Unless you know where you come from, you will never know where you can go.

Learning from the Past

This sort of reflection is extremely important to the working class struggle. Heritage Day provides a space to think back, to look back at where we have come from, and to think about where we need to go in future. It's an opportunity to reflect on what we have achieved so far, but also on what we still need to achieve in order to secure emancipation.

If we look at that past from the perspective of the working class masses, it's clear that the past is bittersweet.

It's bitter: there are many injustices and horrors that we cannot avoid seeing. It's bitter: there is a long dark night of suffering, dispossession and exploitation that casts its shadow over today. It's bitter: the past is the time of massacres of the working class, of the repression of unions, of the pass laws, of the Land Act of 1913, of the Bantu Education system, of the imperialist wars against Africans and Afrikaners.

Struggles and Victories

It's sweet also: the past saw ordinary people, the people on the ground – the working class – rise up and fight for justice, for equality, for our rights: to dignity, to decency, to decide how to run the basics of our lives.

It's sweet: the time of the mass strikes and uprisings, such as those of 1913, 1918, 1922, 1946, 1960, 1973, 1976, 1983, and 1993. These brought light into the darkness, into the long, dark night of suffering and oppression, where bitter battles were waged for freedom.

It's sweet: when ordinary people stood together, when the working class united, when the sleeping armies of the exploited, the oppressed, the workers, the poor, woke up, the ground shook. The darkness was driven back.

It's sweet: every small victory fed the campfires of hope, fanned the flames of resistance and rebellion, moved the people into more action.

1913 saw massive struggles by white as well as black workers for basic rights. 1918 saw the first attempt at a general strike by black workers. 1922 saw an armed rebellion by workers, which led to the first laws that gave trade unions some legal standing. 1946 shook the mining industry. 1960 shook the pass laws. 1973 revived the unions. 1976 rocked the townships. 1983–1984 started the final dismantling of apartheid. Massive struggles in 1993 saw the tide finally turn, opening the door to the 1994 transition.

A Global Movement

The struggles of the working class in South Africa do not stand alone. They are part of the larger struggle of ordinary people, the oppressed and exploited masses, worldwide. A struggle

that has taken place as long as society has been divided between rich and poor, rulers and ruled, masters and servants, kings and commoners.

The working class is a class forged in the crucible of class struggle, hammered in the fires and flames of class battles, hardened into a force that can change the world.

Taken, Not Given

It was the working and poor masses of the people that broke slavery, that made slavery illegal worldwide. When unions were illegal everywhere in the world, the masses made them legal, fighting factory by factory, mine by mine, ship by ship, farm by farm, and office by office.

There was a time when no commoner anywhere could even vote, but the masses of ordinary people fought. They took that right – just as every single right and claim by the working classes has been won from below, by struggle.

As the anarchist Severino Digiovanni once said: “The right to life is not given. It is taken.” Whatever our backgrounds, our culture, African or European or Asian or American, in each society it has been the masses, the working class, that has stood up and said,

“No. Enough is enough”

...and through struggles and battles, won its demands.

The Chains that Bind

Now let us look to the present. How far do we need to go still?

Our struggles are not over. The chains of poverty still bind us. Second class education still binds – and yes, it also blinds – the masses of the people, the working class. Unemployment, hunger, racism still bind us.

The black working class of South Africa is still waiting for the dawn. The night is fading, but the new dawn has not yet come. We are still waiting for the sun of freedom to blaze out, burning away the long dark night of suffering and dispossession and exploitation.

Many victories have been won. Let us never forget this. Let us never forget this. The pass laws? Broken. The National Party government? Broken. The Land Act? Broken. The ban on permanent African homes in the cities? Broken.

But look around us. Poverty, ignorance, corruption. At the Marikana mine? The murder of men who wanted a better wage for their families.

The Politicians and Bosses

At the government level? Corruption and theft by men and women in office. The rich get richer. The politicians make and break promises. Large private corporations fix bread and milk prices, taking food from the mouths of children. State companies fail to keep the lights on, the water running.

Strong men and women spend their lives working for a boss, and find, at the end, when they are tired and broken, that they are fired, left aside like rubbish. The men and women who built this country are thrown away like rubbish.

The Sun Must Rise

The working class is better off now in many ways than it was under apartheid. Yes, a mighty victory has been won.

But the war is not over. The working class is far from free. The long dark night of suffering and dispossession and exploitation still needs to be blasted away by the red dawn of freedom. A mighty struggle is still needed. The armies of the exploited, the oppressed, the workers, the poor, which are the unions, the community groups, the student movements – these armies cannot rest.

What is needed? What is the task for now? It is to free our minds; to break the chains of mental slavery. To question a society where the rich and powerful few, black as well as white, rule like kings. Where the mighty stride the world like elephants, and the masses are trampled into the grass. To question and challenge a society that is a factory of crime and misery.

Arm Yourself with Knowledge

To understand these truths is the first step to lifting the darkness:

Only the mass of the people – the working class – can change society, but only by uniting, across race and language, and by struggling;

Only the mass of the people – the working class – can change society, but only by understanding that society can be changed, can be made better;

Only the mass of the people – the working class – can change society, but only for the better, when it is understood that society must be changed into a society based on social and economic equality;

Only the mass of the people – the working class – can change society, but only for the better, when it is understood that society must be changed into a society based on direct grassroots control of the economy, of daily life, of society as a whole.

March to the Dawn

To find our way in the darkness now, to be free, means to arm ourselves with the light of knowledge, and to enlighten our class, the working class, to shine light across the battlefields of darkness.

Let us blaze out our light, blaze out in the long dark night of suffering and dispossession and exploitation. Let us march towards the sun.

For, when we are armed with the truth, we can organise and re-organise our forces.

And make the last marches to victory.

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Heritage Day is a post-apartheid South African national holiday; unlike most, it has no clear link to major struggles in the past, although there are efforts to position it as a more “political” day. The talk below was given by Lucien van der Walt at an event organised by Sakhaluntu Cultural Group in Grahamstown, for black youth.

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