The background of the book cover is a grayscale photograph of a group of people, possibly at a protest or public gathering, with their hands raised. The image is slightly faded and serves as a backdrop for the text.

CLASS
STRUGGLE, THE LEFT
AND
POWER



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AN ILRIG EDUCATION SERIES PUBLICATION



MAY 2020

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PART 1

Twenty-five years into democracy the black working class majority in South Africa has not experienced any meaningful improvements in its conditions. The apartheid legacy of unequal education, healthcare and housing and the super-exploitation of black workers continues under the ANC and is perpetuated by the neoliberal policies it has imposed.

These troubles are part of the world's troubles; this neoliberalism is part of global neoliberalism. As the global economic crisis deepens, the global ruling class is making the working class pay, transferring the costs to workers and the poor, leading to increased poverty, unemployment, inequality and insecurity. And so in South Africa neoliberal oppression is piled

on top of national oppression. The only force capable of changing this situation is the working class locally and internationally. Yet to do so, struggles need to come together, new forms of organisation appropriate to the context are needed; and they need both to be infused with a revolutionary progressive politics and to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Some such struggles have occurred over recent years, including the historic platinum mineworkers' strike and farmworkers' strike in 2012; but the many struggles have not yet pulled together into a new movement.

Outside the ANC alliance, there have indeed been many efforts to unite struggles – but these



have largely failed to resonate with the working class in struggle and form the basis of a new movement.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the newly-formed Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) – which got less than 25 000 votes in the national elections, despite the fact that the union that conceived it, Numsa, claims nearly 400 000 members.

NUMSA'S NON-MOMENT

When the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) announced its resolutions, following its historic 2013 Special National Congress, to break with the ANC and SACP and to form a “United Front against neoliberalism”, many on the left were hopeful that this would give working class movements the new ideological and organisational direction they need.

The United Front, Numsa said, was not about building a new organisation, party or labour federation but “a way to join other organisations in action, in the trenches”, gaining community support for Numsa campaigns and building “concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place”.

“the working-class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa”

It looked as if there hopes were not misplaced when, for example, unemployed youth and community activists across the country responded positively to Numsa’s call by supporting the 19 March 2014 actions against the Youth Wage Subsidy. Branches were set up and, despite initial scepticism, community activists joined.

By August 2017, however, the Johannesburg branch of the United Front had declared that, “After the initial enthusiasm, there is now a feeling the UF has largely collapsed, with only a couple of local structures still active.” Numsa had shifted its focus and resources to establishing a “Movement for Socialism” because “the working-class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa”.

Having gained some community support for its campaigns, including the United Front itself, the success of the United Front in building working class unity going forward depended on whether Numsa would reciprocate by putting its resources and capacity at the service of building “concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place”.





Instead, Numsa energies were shifted into calling for a new workers' party, while presenting itself as the vanguard of the whole working class, and in so doing missed its moment.

THE SRWP WON'T SET YOU FREE

Numsa undertook to “conduct a thoroughgoing discussion on previous attempts to build socialism as well as current experiments to build socialism” and “commission an international study on the historical formation of working-class parties, including exploring different type of parties – from mass workers' parties to vanguard parties”. But it already knew what it was aiming for. It had said that a new political party was on the cards – to replace the SACP, which had become corrupted by the neoliberal state, as the political vanguard of the working class.

The potential of the United Front approach for building working class unity is precisely because it accommodates ideological differences in order to build the unity of working class formations in struggle. But Numsa still looks to the legacy of Communist Parties. And these parties have historically used united fronts to create unity in action in struggles against

capitalist attacks, but also with the aim of winning over the majority in these struggles to their programme – in this case the formation of a new party, that they would lead – under their Party leadership and no one else's.

While Numsa has broken with Cosatu and the SACP organisationally, it has not broken with them ideologically. The belief by a section of full-time Numsa leaders that they are the vanguard of the working class and their insistence on building a party to contest state power are founded on the same ideological certainties and theoretical understandings of class, power and the nature of the state as the SACP – with the same strategic implications that, invariably, will have the same disappointing outcomes.

If we really want to build a movement for socialism, and to avoid merely replacing one set of rulers for another, the state-centric left needs to re-think its understandings class, power and the nature of the state in light of the empirical evidence and learn from the mistakes of the past, instead of repeating them and expecting a different outcome.

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PART 2

The first part of this series stated that, despite various well-intentioned efforts by forces on the extra-Alliance and independent left over recent years to unite working class struggles in South Africa, these largely have and will continue to fail to resonate with the working class, help build unity in struggle and form the basis of a new movement because of the theoretical understandings of class and power – and their strategic implications – on which they are founded and which are prevalent on much of the left.

This article will give a basic overview of these theoretical understandings of class and power and their strategic implications and limitations and why it is therefore necessary to refine and develop understandings of class and power more capable of responding to

the context of the neoliberal restructuring of the working class in order to advance the class struggle in pursuit of socialism.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF NUMSA'S NON-MOMENT

The strategic approach that Numsa's bureaucracy and permanent leaders have taken since its 2013 Special National Congress, from calling for the launch of a "United Front against to neoliberalism", exploring "the establishment of a Movement for Socialism" to the launch of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) is, like Cosatu and the SACP, informed by its class analysis. In fact, it is informed by the same class analysis.

According to this analysis capitalism is a class society in





which the ruling class minority (bourgeoisie) exploits the working class majority (proletariat) in order to extract a profit (surplus value) to become even more rich and powerful. It is able to do this because it holds private ownership of the means of production (factories, land, mines etc.), which is legally recognised and protected by the state. Because the working class owns nothing – due to “primitive accumulation” (e.g. colonialism, dispossession of land and the means of production from the direct producers) – workers are forced to sell their labour in exchange for a wage in order to buy the goods they need to survive (commodities) on the market. Class is defined primarily in terms of one’s relations to the means of production: the ruling class owns the means of production but doesn’t do productive work, the working class sells its labour for a wage at the point of production but doesn’t own it. This, inevitably, gives rise to the class struggle for greater economic gains and an extension of rights and freedoms, in which the

“Class is defined primarily in terms of one’s relations to the means of production”

(permanently employed) industrial proletariat is identified as the only revolutionary subject because of its location at the point of production (factories, mines) and, therefore, its ability to withdraw its labour by going on strike. Because they are not considered to have the potential to be revolutionary other sectors of the working class, such as the peasantry (small farmers and rural workers) and “lumpen proletariat” (the unemployed, people working in the informal economy etc.), are typically ignored. Something which might help explain why, despite all their lip service to the contrary, all the major unions – whether Cosatu, Saftu or others – have by and large not only failed but never seriously tried to organise precarious labour broker, casual and short-term contract workers.

However, according to this theory the working class, including the revolutionary subject (industrial workers), is struggling so much just to survive that they cannot

develop a revolutionary consciousness and their demands and struggles are only centred around so-called bread and butter issues. Because the working class is only capable of reaching this, what Lenin called “trade union consciousness” it needs to be led by a political vanguard of so-called revolutionaries organised in the form of a political party that seeks state power in order to implement socialism through the state.

Sectors of the working class outside of the permanently employed industrial proletariat are not only ignored or dismissed for not being revolutionary but even looked down on with disdain by this self-declared revolutionary vanguard – which might explain both the Numsa leadership’s reference to community struggles as “leaderless and disorganised” and the heckling by Numsa delegates to the Working Class Summit when, for example, unemployed community activists and farmworkers expressed different opinions.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS & LIMITATIONS THEREOF

As stated, the ruling class minority is able to get away with this situation of exploitation and injustice with the help of the

state. The state, according to this analysis, is a neutral institution that can function in the interests of the working class or ruling class depending on what forces are in control of state power. Because the state is understood to be neutral state power is therefore something that, if under the control of a socialist or workers’ party, can be used in the interests of the working class and in pursuit of socialism.

The implication of this analysis, besides overlooking the creative revolutionary potential of the vast majority of the working

“the ruling class minority is able to get away with this situation of exploitation and injustice with the help of the state.”

class, is that the building of a political party to contest state power is both necessary and inevitable. This can either be done by contesting elections (reformist socialism) or an armed uprising (revolutionary socialism).

Because, again according to this analysis, the broader working class is supposedly incapable of being revolutionary and therefore requires an enlightened revolutionary vanguard to take control of the state and implement socialism from above; and because power is seen to lie primarily in the state and as something to be “seized” or “taken” so-called mass movements, such as unions, social





movements and the United Front, are but a means to an end. That end is to build support for the party and help get it into state power – either by voting or through revolution.

However, because the state by its nature is an authoritarian and hierarchical institution that centralises decision-making and other power, which flows from the top down, so too does every political party whose aim it is to gain state power replicate this structure. Moreover, because the leaderships thereof – including socialist and workers’ parties – inherit the privileges and power of the predecessors they dispose of, instead of destroying exploitative class relations they tend to and have, historically, simply reproduced them in the name of the workers and poor.

The next installation in this education series will look at a more nuanced theoretical understanding of class and power and the strategic implications thereof for building working class unity in struggle that offer an alternative to the tried, tested and consistently disappointing state-centric one on which the SRWP and much of the left is based.





PART 3

The first parts of this series gave readers a basic introduction to an ‘authoritarian’ or state socialist [Marxist] theoretical understanding of class, power and the nature of the state and the strategic implications and limitations thereof for forming the basis of a new movement and building working class unity in struggle.

Part three looks at a ‘libertarian’ or ‘anti-statist’ socialist [anarchist] theory of class, power and the role and nature of the state that offers an alternative theoretical basis for building new forms of organising and unity in struggle to the tried,

tested and consistently disappointing statist one.

SOCIETY OF EXPLOITATION AND DOMINATION

Like Marxism an anarchist class analysis holds that capitalism is a class society in which a ruling class minority exploits the working class majority in order to accumulate wealth and power; and that it is able to do this because of private ownership of the means of production, legally recognised and protected by the state. However, while there is much agreement between libertarian and authoritarian socialists on the critique



of capitalism as a class society based on exploitation there is disagreement around theoretical understandings of the state, class and revolutionary subject.

For anarchists capitalism is not just a system of economic exploitation – although that is a defining characteristic of capitalism – but also a society of domination. Domination occurs when a person or group of people (the dominator) have power over other people (the dominated) and can force them to do things in their own interests – which are different to the interests of the dominated.

There are different types of domination. For example, gender domination (patriarchy) occurs when men dominate women. Other forms of domination occur when, for example, whites dominate blacks, christians dominate muslims or one country dominates another. The main form of domination in capitalism is economic, when a minority of rich people dominate the working and poor majority. Central to this domination is the question of the state.

Contrary to what state centred socialists believe, for anarchists the state is not a neutral force that can be used either in the interests of the capitalists or the workers depending

on who is in control of it. Since its inception the state, whatever the existing mode of production, has always been an instrument for perpetuating inequality and minority class rule and curtailing and exterminating liberty. Today the state has two fundamental objectives: to ensure the conditions for the production and reproduction of capitalism and to ensure its own legitimacy, continuity and control.

The statist supported the capture of the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat as an intermediate stage – which was falsely called socialism – between capitalism and communism. The position of the libertarian socialists is that for the construction of socialism the state must not be captured but destroyed, together with capitalism, by means of the social revolution.

While sharing the belief that class struggle is absolutely central and relevant in society today libertarian socialists argue that, by identifying the urban industrial worker as the unique and historic revolutionary subject, orthodox Marxism has generally ignored and looked down on other categories of the exploited classes that, for the anarchists, are also potentially revolutionary subjects.

“For anarchists capitalism is not just a system of economic exploitation – although that is a defining characteristic of capitalism – but also a society of domination.”



CLASS STRUGGLE AND CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS

An anarchist class analysis includes in the camp of the exploited classes – which can and should contribute to the process of social transformation by means of class struggle – other categories that have in large part received the attention of anarchists throughout history. It is important to stress that anarchists do not consider as part of the exploited classes individuals who are in theory in peripheral areas, but that in practice establish relations of domination over others, thus becoming new centres. Hence the need for all the struggles of the exploited classes to have a revolutionary perspective, such that they don't simply seek to turn parts of the peripheral areas into new centres.

This approach to the concept of class does not change the class struggle as the main terrain for social transformation, but offers a different way of seeing the goal of the class struggle: the transformation of centre-periphery relations, or more specifically, the transformation of the relations of domination of the peripheries by the centres.

Proceeding from this definition, there are two ways of thinking about social transformation: one, statist, historically used by the heirs of mainstream Marxism (revolutionary or reformist) and another, anti-statist, used by the anarchists.

Statists think of the centre as a means, and

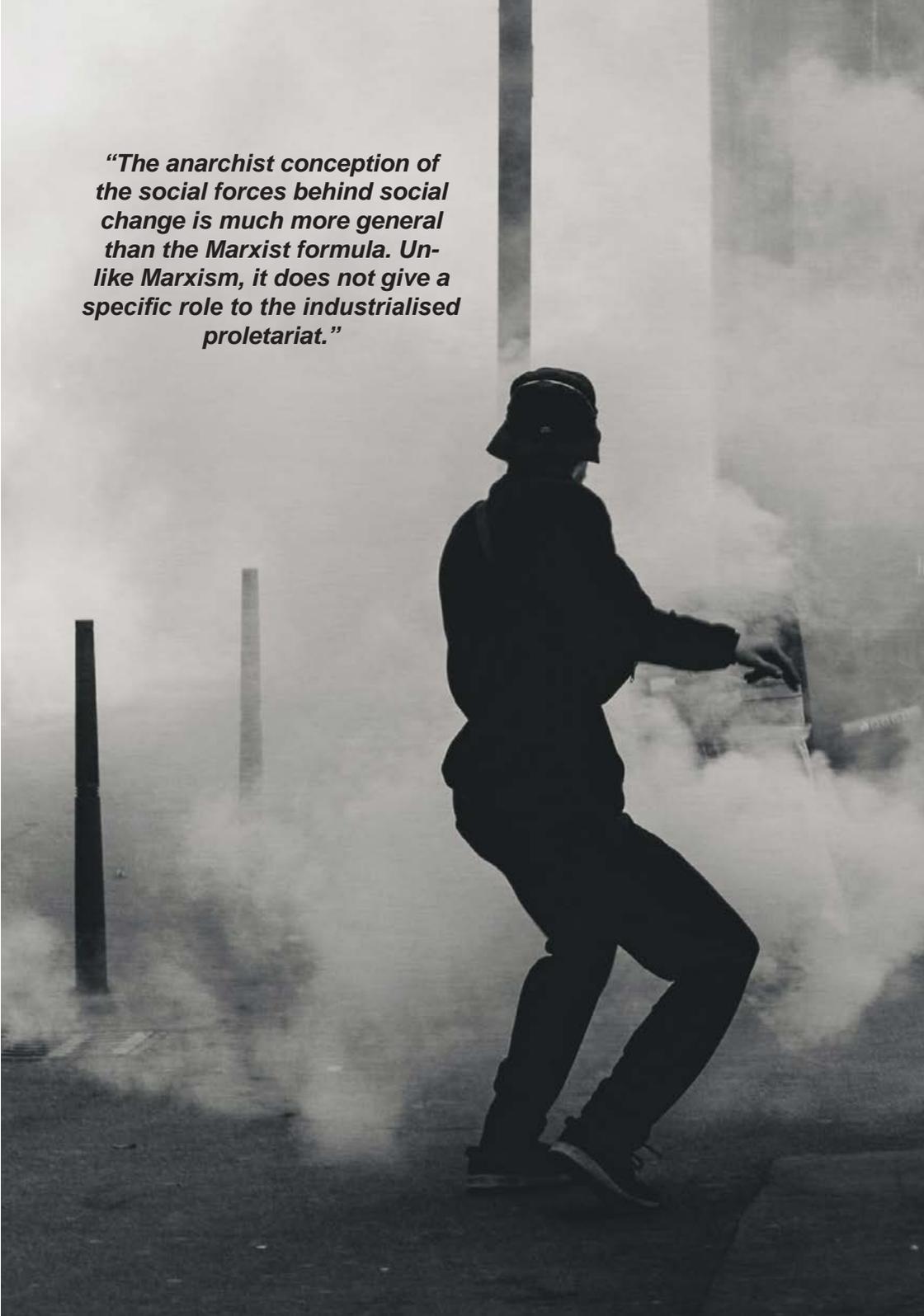
orientate their politics towards it. For them, the centre – considering this to be the state, the party, the army, the union bureaucracy, the position of control – is an instrument for the emancipation of society, and the revolution means in first place the capturing of the centre and its power structure, or the creation of a new centre. The statist's very conception of class is based on the centre, when defining the permanently employed industrial proletariat as a historical subject and excludes and marginalises other categories of the exploited classes that are in the periphery like, for example, the peasantry, precarious workers and the so-called lumpen proletariat.

Anarchists do not think of the centre as a means, and struggle permanently against it, building their revolutionary model and their strategy of struggle in the direction of all the peripheries. That is, in its activity in the class struggle anarchism considers as elements of the exploited classes traditional communities, peasants, unemployed, underemployed, precarious workers, homeless and other categories frequently overlooked by the authoritarians.

The anarchist conception of the social forces behind social change is much more general than the orthodox Marxist formula. Unlike Marxism, it does not give a specific role to the industrialised proletariat. In anarchist writings we find all kinds of workers and poor, all the oppressed, all those that somehow belong to peripheral groups or areas and are therefore potential factors in the revolutionary struggle for social change.



“The anarchist conception of the social forces behind social change is much more general than the Marxist formula. Unlike Marxism, it does not give a specific role to the industrialised proletariat.”





PART 4

Part three of this series introduced a 'libertarian' socialist [anarchist] class analysis of capitalism and the state as a society of exploitation and domination, and the concepts of centre-periphery relations and class struggle as a struggle against domination.

This part looks at the state and the power it exerts over society as a form of domination that, in order to bring about social transformation and introduce socialism, must be abolished together with capitalism by building popular self-managed power and social force.

STATE POWER IS DOMINATION

Anarchists believe that to achieve socialism the state

must be destroyed, together with capitalism, through a social revolution. This is because the power exerted by the state is a form of domination. The state – like the vanguard parties that want to control it – thinks it understands the needs of the people better than the people themselves and upholds a hierarchical form of management of society; by which means the class that controls the state exercises domination over the rest of society. Any state creates and reproduces relations of domination, exploitation and has a monologs on violence under the pretext of protecting its “citizens”.

Like liberal bourgeois democracy, state centred (Marxian) socialism argues it is possible to affect emancipatory social



transformation through the state. But by delegating our right to do politics to professional politicians that enter the state in order to represent us we are giving our power to someone that makes decisions for us: there is an inevitable division between the class that does politics – the decision-makers – and the classes that follow their elected leaders. Like representative democracy, democratic centralism alienates people politically because it centralises decision-making power and separates the people from those who do politics on their behalf: whether parliamentarians, councillors or central committee members etc. The more the politicians and professional “revolutionaries” are responsible for “doing politics”, and making political decision, the less the people engage in politics and the more they remain alienated and distant from making decision – regardless of whether these politicians and professional

“For anarchists the emancipation of the dominated classes is impossible in any state that may exist”

so-called revolutionaries are from the ANC, SACP or SRWP. This condemns the people to a position of spectator and not master of their own destiny, directly responsible for solving their own problems.

For the anarchists the emancipation of the dominated classes is impossible in any state that may exist – including a so-called workers’ state – and the first condition of this emancipation is the destruction of all states. Therefore, any project of emancipatory social transformation that seeks social revolution and socialism must have the abolition of capitalism as well as the state as its objective.

POPULAR ORGANISATION AND SOCIAL FORCE

For anarchists, the social transformation we desire occurs through the building of

POWER AND PARTICIPATION

Power



popular organisation and the progressive increase in its social force until the moment at which it becomes strong enough to eclipse the power of capitalism and the state and possible to overthrow capitalism and the state through social revolution – opening the way to libertarian [i.e. stateless] socialism.

Class society is the result of a relationship of forces, or permanent conflict – which takes the form of class struggle – between capitalism, the state and other diverse social and political forces. At present capitalism and the state are stronger and have a greater social force than the popular classes and, therefore, have power over them. In this sense capitalism and the state exercise domination over other socio-political forces that constitute resistance to them.

What is “social force”? Every individual, as a social agent and potentially revolutionary subject, naturally possesses a social force that is the energy that can be exerted in order to achieve their objectives. This force varies from one person to another and even in the same person over a period of time. To achieve their objectives, individuals frequently make use of instruments that can increase their social force. Many things can be used to increase social force, such as: weapons, information, training, access to resources, machines etc. However, the most important instrument for this is organisation; which can happen in an authoritarian way, by means of domination, or in a libertarian way, by means of free association.

In an authoritarian organisation the social force of different agents (e.g. in the



state with an army, or in a company with wage labour) is alienated, putting them in a position of domination in relation to the organisation (i.e. the state and the boss), and making them contribute to an alien objective, different to their own. This is exactly how the social force of the current system is constituted today: by means of the alienation of diverse agents that contribute to the objectives of capitalism, which are not the same as theirs. In a libertarian or anti-authoritarian organisation it is self-management that produces the progressive increase of social force necessary to overthrow capitalism and the state and, by means of the social revolution, to

build libertarian [stateless] socialism.

For anarchists the objective of popular self-organisation as a form of active resistance is progressively increasing its social force, to overthrow capitalism and the state and, by means of the social revolution, to build libertarian socialism. This increase of social force is achieved by the self-organisation of the exploited classes with the greatest number of people possible.

“Every individual, as a social agent and potentially revolutionary subject, naturally possesses a social force that is the energy that can be applied in order to achieve their objectives ”

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PART 5

The final part of this education series looks at the strategic implications for building working class unity in struggle, that may offer an alternative theoretical basis for building new forms of organising to the tried, tested and consistently disappointing state-centric one.

The theory of class, power and the nature of the state that predominates on the left has, both historically and contemporarily, shown itself to be wanting. Anarchism offers a more nuanced analysis of class, power and the nature of the state. But for an adequate understanding of the state, it's necessary to have a deeper analysis of power.

POWER AS SELF-MANAGEMENT VS. DOMINATION

Power is not something simply to be “seized” because power lies not only in the state, but

exists in all social relationships and all spheres of society. Power is a social relationship between different forces and provides the basis for establishing regulations, controls, standards, systems etc. – which are directly related to decision making.

The conditions and possibility for participating in decision making in the spheres of society (e.g. economic, political, cultural etc.) is based on power relations. In this sense power can be understood as a spectrum with two extremes, or two types of power: self-management – which maximised participation – on the one end, and domination – which limits and undermines participation, on the other.

Domination is a hierarchical social relationship that can occur in all spheres of society when some people, or groups of people, decide on matters that





concern others. Domination entails a command-obey relationship between dominator and dominated and – although domination cannot be reduced to ones relationship with the means of production alone – is the basic foundation of class relations. Class is defined not just in economic terms, based on exploitation and relations to the means of production, but in terms of power relations and the concept of domination as well; taking into consideration relationships to the means of production as well as the means of administration (the instruments that govern society, specifically the state bureaucracy) and the means of coercion (the instruments – such as the army, police, prisons and courts – that allow those that govern to impose decisions by force).

From an anarchist class analysis the ruling classes, or dominant classes, are comprised of the owners of the means of production, including private capitalists and landowners, as well as high-ranking state and military officials, judges, parlia-

mentarians and the technocracy.

The working or dominated classes are made up of the workers, peasantry and marginalised people in general.

STATES, STRUGGLE AND STRATEGY

The organisational form and the strategy the dominated classes in struggle adopt must be consistent with the objectives of the class struggle. If the strategic objective

“Domination is a hierarchical social relationship that can occur in all spheres of society when some people, or groups of people, decide on matters that concern others”

is merely to make reforms within the existing power structures of the system (i.e. the state), centralising and hierarchical organisational forms and forms of political participation will work. However, if the objective of the class struggle is to radically transform the model of class and power relations, other forms of organisation and political participation are necessary.

Although significant reforms can be achieved from within the existing structure



capitalism and the state, strategies for social transformation within the framework of the system of domination, based on the state-party model, are insufficient for a transformation of the system of domination and unequal class and power relations themselves.

This is because these reforms adjustments, when carried out by the state, reinforce its power by limiting the participation of people that are not in the state. Thus, they are actions taken by the dominant classes to solve problems that have a direct implication in the legitimacy of the system that puts them in such a position.

State actions can promote social reforms, but not profound social transformation, which would imply change in the structure of the system and model of power.

This does not mean, however, that all re-

forms within the current system of domination tend to strengthen the model of dominant power.

In most cases social movements, such as trade unions and other mass-based organisations formed by the dominated classes to resist domination and improve their conditions, have narrow objectives around short-term achievements and single issues, such as increased wages and improved working conditions, affordable access to service delivery, land and jobs etc.

However, unlike the state, which as an institution is central to upholding the current system of domination, social movements have historically been spaces for the dominated classes to act in their own interests.

If, on the one hand, short-term reforms from the state tend to reinforce its legitimacy and,

“State actions can promote social reforms, but not profound social transformation, which would imply change in the structure of the system and model of power”



therefore, the system of which it is an essential part, short-term gains won through the class struggle carried out by social movements can serve to strengthen a distinct project of building self-managed power and social force, which is in opposition to the current model of power and class relations.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

In order to overthrow the system of domination and replace it with an egalitarian, self-management system it is necessary to develop appropriate strategies and tactics that lead in this direction. Tactics and strategies that are based on or strengthen relationships of domination cannot be used to achieve emancipatory social transformation – nor can organisations and movements that adopt them.

The self-management organisation of social movements – which involves shared decisions in relation to planning and decision-making processes – therefore be-

comes an essential means for building a self-managing power model, which can build on short-term gains for the accumulation of social force (strength) of the dominated classes.

These gains, however, cannot be avoided from a strategic objective that, even in the long term, should guide the strengthening of a model of power that opposes the current one and that can support the bases of self-management and boost a process of broad social transformation through concrete achievements in different spheres (improvement of economic conditions, greater political participation, etc.) and subjective construction that can strengthen cultures and ideologies of resistance specific to the dominated classes and enhance the will of the agents involved.

This broad social transformations can only happen from the everyday struggles, which start from the most basic levels of society.





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