Comments on some contributions to a discussion on the significance of the Coronavirus pandemic and the way forward

Comments have been requested on a number of texts (see below Ed.) which have arisen in left-wing, socialist and Marxist circles in response to the Coronavirus crisis and the background of chronic economic and environmental crisis.

Both Cde Shaheen Khan in South Africa and the "Public Reading Rooms" comrades in the UK make a number of serious analytical points in describing the current situation. Shaheen (1) writes: The capitalist system is in deep crisis and the rule of the capitalist class on a global scale is in jeopardy". *No Going Back* describes the coronavirus crisis and the feeble economic recovery from the 2008 banking crisis as arising from "the structural limits of the entire system of social reproduction". (This latter document also adds that "The wanton destruction of nature by capital creates the perfect conditions for the emergence and spread of pandemics"). All three documents present proposals for a fresh impulse from the socialist movement and the working class to respond to these accumulating crises.

Both Shaheen and *No Going Back* emphasise the international and systemic character of the crisis. "As the pandemic spreads across the globe, the global health emergency is rapidly evolving into a crisis of the entire existing world social order", says Shaheen (1). "The pandemic is global; it cannot be stopped in one country" says *No Going Back*.

This is why Shaheen (1) says: “The task in the days, weeks and months ahead is to build a conscious socialist leadership throughout the world”. (This assertion is missing for some reason in Shaheen [2]). *No Going Back* calls for “The convocation of a *Zimmerwald* conference – which united the anti-war left in 1915 – for our times, to unify all those prepared to fight for a fundamental change in society; who understand the necessity of renewing the left’s strategic and theoretical framework as well as going beyond its existing organisational forms.”

All three documents lay great stress upon the activity and consciousness of the working class. In “Our Perspectives and Tasks” Shaheen Khan states “The working class is not taking this lying down … these are the molecular processes where the class is gradually beginning to comprehend the problems arising from the social crisis. Consciousness is determined by conditions”. He then takes the thought further: “A revolutionary party bases its tactics on a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness. While the party must impress through its propaganda and agitation … the dangers of the epidemic and the need for physical distancing we must begin to take leadership of the mass protest movement that is gaining momentum. The working class on its own is fighting and breaking down the parameters of the bourgeois lockdown and we need to direct this anger in the right direction and in the right quarters”. Both of Comrade Shaheen’s documents contain sets of proposals for a programme of action to bring this about.

The *No Going Back* theses state:

“The most important factor in world politics is the struggle of working people, the poor and dispossessed to remake the world; most immediately it is to defend themselves against both the pandemic and the poverty of their everyday lives …” And a bit later on, emphatically: “The pandemic indicates the possibility of ending the permanent subordination of labour to

capital”.

Both Shaheen and *No Going Back* reject reformist policies and solutions. Shaheen (2) explains:

“These are difficult times, not only for the bourgeois but also for the leadership of the working class. Many bourgeois economists and NGOs have been making recommendations to the government to adopt a Keynesian economic approach rather than the neoliberal path they have been following. This is a nationalist capitalist trajectory which does not in any way serve the interests of the working class”. Although Shaheen addresses his proposals to the Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party, he is critical of the leadership of the National Union of Metalworkers’ (NUMSA) who established that party. “The NUMSA open letter to the President is different” (from the Keynesian economic approach). “However we think it fails to address the question from a class struggle perspective and remains an economistic approach to the question”.

No Going Back is even harder on reformism: “There can be no support for those in the labour movement who present the struggle against the virus as a national crisis in which class-struggle is suspended”. Quite right: the way the COVID-19 crisis is dealt with strikingly reveals aspects of class struggle which are even accentuated in this context. They go on: “Leaders of the movement who fight for the interests of their members must be given every backing”. And so they should; but who determines which leaders are fighting “for the interests of their members”? Like Shaheen Khan, the “Public Reading Rooms” implicitly set themselves up as the judges of that. They go on: “But we cannot support those who seek to corral the working class into subordination to the existing system. The institutions of social democracy have failed to adequately challenge capitalism, and have even failed to defend their own achievements”. As the argument goes on, all “social democrats” are (wrongly) identified as

“embracing of neo-liberalism in the 1990s” which “made them complicit in the savaging of the welfare state.” So *No Going Back* throws into one pot all the groups in, for example, the UK Labour Party, when that includes in its ranks both unreformed Blairites (who were rather more than just “complicit” in the attacks on the welfare state between 1997 and 2010) and the supporters of former party leader Jeremy Corbyn who have spent a great deal of time elaborating precisely a “Keynesian economic approach”, but did that mainly in order to defend the democratic, economic and social rights of the masses (“the many”) including the working class. *No Going Back* concludes this paragraph with a resounding phrase: “The pandemic exposes the illusory nature of systemic transformation through incremental social change”. In plain English they are saying: We think the Corbyn initiative in the Labour Party has fallen flat on its face and we would like to make recruits among its remnants”.

What is clear in all three documents is that none of the discussion and the shaping of policies and programme demands arise in close connection with or on the same wavelength as the main groups of workers in struggle. **All the authors’ remarks arise from *contemplating* the various media reports of the current situation, refracted through the discussion in a milieu of educated people for whom ideas matter as ideas.** There is of course nothing wrong with that: we all have to orientate ourselves daily, hourly, minute by minute as the crisis unfolds at various levels, reflected in the media.

But it is not enough to proceed directly from the **impressions** in one’s own head, having seen a news item and tossed it around in social media, to formulating proposals for action to place in front of workers.

Or to put it differently: if you are in an ongoing involvement in workers’ attempts to deal with the class struggle and the issues that arise within it, then you will be very clearly (often painfully!) aware of the contradictions and moments

within workers' consciousness and the preoccupations they bring to the struggle, what their priorities are. Your thoughts, when fresh and probably contradictory impressions flood in, will in that case be how concretely particular workers and groups of workers can be persuaded to react, how they themselves will take proposals on, reshape them and fashion them into real weapons of struggle.

This is a long way away from "A revolutionary party bases its tactics on a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness" based on a few impressions. "Mass consciousness" has a past and a future and its present is anyway contradictory. Slogans and programmes which are slightly (but not too far) ahead of the working class are powerful levers to action. Those that are too far ahead risk falling flat on their faces. Doing this involves a really demanding, actually scientific, "calculation of the changes of mass consciousness".

It is one thing to pontificate about the working class as an abstraction; it is quite another to work in sensuous involvement in class struggle, engagement within the forms of organisation which exist in the working class in every country.

To identify one's own reactions to the news with the reaction aroused in the working class is in itself a grave mistake. To proceed from these subjective impressions and use them to decide for ourselves what practices workers should adopt is to succumb to pure contemplation – a form of idealism, if that is where you leave it.

It is even worse if – like Shaheen (2) – you add: "we must begin to take leadership of the mass protest movement that is gaining momentum". Being guided by the fruits of one's own untested thoughts is one thing: informing workers that these thoughts are the only correct ones and that they need to follow them is another, and it has nothing to do with providing leadership!

These approaches add up to the petit-bourgeois "left-wing communism" which Lenin excoriated in his 1920 pamphlet of the same name. Lenin asks: "How is the discipline of the proletariat's revolutionary party maintained? How is it tested? How is it reinforced? First, by the class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard and by its devotion to the revolution, by its tenacity, self-sacrifice and heroism. Second, by its ability to link up, maintain the closest contact and – if you wish – to merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people – primarily with the proletariat, *but also with the non-proletarian masses of working people*. Third, by the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard, by the correctness of its political strategy and tactics, provided the broad masses have seen, from their own experience, that they are correct … without these conditions, all attempts to establish discipline inevitably fall flat and end up in phrase-mongering and clowning. On the other hand, these conditions cannot emerge at once. They are created only by prolonged effort and hard-won experience. **Their creation is facilitated by a correct revolutionary theory, which, in its turn, is not a dogma, but assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement".**

The only organisation with the potential "to link up, maintain the closest contact and – if you wish – to merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people" in South Africa is the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP), set up as a result of the struggle of the National Union of Metalworkers' of South Africa (NUMSA) and their break with the African National Congress -South African Communist Party alliance.

Fortuitously, the Socialist Workers Revolutionary Party has just used social media to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth. Virtually alone in the world among mass

workers' organisations, NUMSA boldly (and rightly) brandishes the banner of Lenin.

Their FaceBook remarks on this auspicious occasion steer carefully clear of laying out and specifying Lenin's actual contributions to our movement. The same is true of a half-hour radio broadcast by Dr Vashna Jagarnath, Deputy General Secretary of the SRWP (Radio 702, 10.30am 21 April 2020). Dr Jagarnath made some interesting observations about Russian history, Lenin's biography and family background, his early studies of capitalism in Russia and his influence in former colonial territories. She avoided any mention of Lenin's theoretical contribution or his role in the formation of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, later its Bolshevik faction, later still the Communist Party Communist movement and in establishing the Communist International.

What emerged from this interview was that Marx was a "theoretician" and Lenin "put his ideas into practice", but there was not really a lot about what these ideas actually were, except that they might have special application in the "global south".

All this makes the SRWP leadership look like a party which has broken with Stalinism (in the acute form of the ANC-SACP), but only incompletely. The decisive tragedy of Stalinism is that it was a political force which first falsified and then obliterated Marxism and Leninism in the movement it dominated. Many former "hardliners" have recoiled from the direst expressions of Stalinism, but their break took them in the direction of liberal bourgeois politics. Even the best ones hesitate to name significant insights that marked the work of Lenin**: that revolution (in whatever part of the world) needs to uproot and destroy bourgeois social relations, production for private profit, and that this requires an international leadership.**

In that same *Left-Wing Communism* Lenin wrote (in 1920):

“At the present moment in history, however, it is the Russian model that reveals to *all* countries something – and something highly significant – of their near and inevitable future. Advanced workers in all lands have long realised this; more often than not they have grasped it with their revolutionary class instinct rather than realised it. Herein lies the international ‘significance’ (in the narrow sense of the word) of **Soviet power and the fundamentals of Bolshevik theory and tactics**” (my emphasis – BA).

We are no longer in that “present moment” (of 1920), and only middle-class radicals masquerading as Bolsheviks can pretend that we are. However, we hope that the leadership and membership of the SRWP will reach for Lenin’s writings – all the major ones at least, and find their current relevance. A good look at the booklet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*” would be a useful start and would aid an understanding of an aspect of the current crisis.

These are the horns of the dilemma on which the SRWP is caught, striving to break from Stalinism but still under the influence of Stalinist evasion and mangling of theoretical questions. But that fact itself can and must be taken together with the position of the working class and the masses in the last five decades. In considering how to encourage a genuine move towards Marxism in the SRWP, we need to devote some thought to those decades.

The context

Outstanding characteristics of economic and social life over the last fifty years have included

•break-neck, revolutionary, increase in the rate of technical development and its social impact

•dismantling of barriers to the reach of trade around the world

•a parallel huge growth in banking and finance

•massive shift in industrial production from its former heartlands to “emerging markets”.

•In the course of the above, workers in the formerly under-developed world were manoeuvred into competing with workers in the old industrial centres, brutally breaking a tradition of solidarity internationally between workers’ movements. This has led to further contradictions in working class consciousness in those centres as jobs and industries disappeared and blind resentment grew. It appeared as if workers could only defend their existence by opposing and doing down workers elsewhere.

•a massively-focussed assault on all socialist ideas as the guiding principles of workers’ movements and organisations, not to mention states. This contributed to the discrediting and collapse of the bureaucratic state in the Soviet Union and its allied states.

All these drives interact with and feed each other. All have had powerful impacts on the way people live and the choices facing them.

They all arise from deliberate decisions adopted by the capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – in order to confront the systemic social and economic crisis which surfaced in the 1970s (about the time the US was being driven out of Vietnam).

The results have been profound. The “advanced” nations of Europe and North America have been more and more stripped of traditional industries and trading patterns, with hugely damaging social consequences. Meanwhile, a country like China, which 40 years ago stood almost completely outside of world markets and whose citizens were mainly employed in agriculture, is now the industrial workshop of the world and a powerful leader in technical development. China has also become a major political power and challenges the hegemony of

the United States.

Bangladesh, which has existed as a country for barely 50 years, has today cornered a huge wedge of the textile and clothing industry which two hundred years ago made Manchester great, although the social, legal and civil rights of the textile workforces there are in some ways worse than the mill workers of Lancashire knew.

But both of these (and many other) economies still rely on selling their products to customers in the wealthy countries of the world. They are thoroughly enmeshed in a variety of ways in “global chains” of supply, production and value.

While huge numbers of people have experienced a significant increase in their living standards from these changes, many have also experienced extremes of exploitation, while others have been expelled from world markets and marginalised from society. But above all huge profits have been made by a comparatively small group of the population. The results of this development of imperialism has been an increase in every dimension of inequality.

This kind of “globalisation” may have helped raise populations out of extreme poverty, but it has also blocked countries’ incipient development and triggered severe social crises.

Banking and finance have assumed enormous importance in daily life. They have been released from traditional controls and have been significant in enabling the “delocalising” of industries. Debt and the trade in debt have become major instruments of economic disruption and restructuring. The “casino” economy ensures that all businesses and industries face a standing holy inquisition based on the “bottom line”: if their business functioning does not yield the absolutely maximum profit, they are closed down, the “assets” realised and the workforce told to go away and die. Many an attempt by a militant working class to win back a little more of the

surplus value they create at work has been undermined by the nimbleness of hyper-mobile capital.

Capitalist relations of production

Inspired by the idea expressed by Adam Smith that each individual ensures the benefit of all by pursuing selfishly their own interest, the lords of finance feel exonerated from contemplating the effects of their activities on the masses, or of even wondering how those masses protect themselves from famine, plague or poverty. This foundational conception for capitalism is most seriously brought into question by the coronavirus pandemic.

The damage inflicted on the workers' socialist movement over the last fifty years has been profound. None of the great political organisations of the working class have emerged unscathed from these years and many, in adapting to the onslaught, have become ever-less ambitious in setting goals and establishing political programmes. This is understandable: the arrangements of capitalist economic globalisation have severely weakened working-class organisation in the workplace and in society. While the trade unions have continued in many places to be a potential bastion of class defiance, the best among them have been fully aware of fighting on the back foot. The old equation of working-class industrial militancy and confidence with political class consciousness, which kept many a Marxist grouping together in the post-World War II period, is worn painfully thin, and mainly lives on among middle-class activists.

(*No Going Back* quite rightly refers to aspects of imperialist policy in the past period, but this is not related to a half-century of class relations and how they have worked out. For them, working-class consciousness is not the outcome of material social processes, it is an abstraction).

The best trades union and socialist political leaders are well

aware of this context however, because they deal with it every day. They are very aware that for many workers their confidence in socialism is severely sapped. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of mass Communist Parties, as well as the vile work of the capitalist media contribute to this lack of confidence, just as the versions of global supply, production and value chains imposed by imperialism since 1970 turn worker against worker and have fostered a nationalist back-lash.

It is unions like Unite the Union in the UK and NUMSA in South Africa which deal with these and other problems on a daily basis. And at the moment that is where the main struggle for the consciousness of the working class is focussed.

And in the absence of real confidence in a socialist future, apparently "reformist" policies demanding government action to secure welfare, protect businesses from bankruptcy and defend workers' living standards can play a role, if they rally a body of the more conscious workers to take their own fate in their hands as a working class leadership.

At a global level, the climate crisis and now the coronavirus pandemic cast a glaring light on the world that imperialism has fashioned. The productive forces of society (industrial capacity, technique, science and above all human labour) are constrained by the social relations of production (capitalism, business, the role of money, the hegemony of the bourgeoisie). So long as the profit motive – that major element in the social relations of production – continues to dominate over the needs of the producers (and of the potential producers currently excluded), the more human society undermines the very conditions for its own continued existence on Earth.

This is the issue posed now. Our job is to assist recognition of this in the working class and in a mutual relationship of struggle. We do need to forge a new relationship between socialist intellectual and worker-activists. At the moment, certainly in the richer established capitalist nations, there

are divisions between the better educated, socially-empowered and liberal-minded section of the labour-force which has generally done rather better out of “global” economy (which is where many of the socialist groups draw their membership) and those employed in less secure and rewarding jobs, who in the best cases are members of “blue-collar” trades unions. This division is one of the big obstacles to overcome.

But our movement has a rich history of resources which can help us to overcome the problems of working-class consciousness which mirrors this division.

A vital text to study

A text which is worth looking at carefully in connection with the current crisis (arising out of the dead-end and serious turning point in “globalisation” is a fragment by Friedrich Engels, part of a planned work (to be called *Forms of Bondage*) which was never completed. At the time Engels was writing, by the way, it was quite normal to refer to “man” as the representative of all human beings. This is not acceptable today, but we should be patient with the text on that account. There are some other aspects of Engels’ ideas in this text which reflect the limitations of the scientific notions of the day.

Because the fragment starts with considerations of *The Part Played by Labour in the Transformation from Ape to Man*, that is the title under which it was ultimately published. The text is available online at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm.

Engels’ topic in these few pages is how human beings are (like all life) part of nature. But they are a part of nature which has also evolved the ability to both envisage and execute changes in nature in order to achieved a desired goal. He explains: “The animal merely *uses* its environment, and brings

about changes in it simply by its presence: man by his changes makes it serves his ends, *masters* it."

But then Engels – this was in the early 1880s – issues a stark warning:

"Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us".

There follow a number of examples of historical human-generated environmental disasters. Engels points out about each "victory" that:

"in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first".

He continues: "Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside of nature – but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and all that our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage of all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly."

Explaining that "with every day that passes we are acquiring a better understanding of these laws," he goes on: "we are more than ever in a position to realise, and hence to control, even the most remote natural consequences of at least our day-to-day production activities. But the more this progresses, the more will men not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body".

(For Engels, the need for a materialist method of thought and opposition to idealist methods was a permanently important matter, and his advice must be taken seriously by all socialists. This is a point which will be expanded later.)

He concludes that “the social science of the bourgeoisie … examines only social effects of human actions in the fields of production and exchange that are actually intended … **As individual capitalists are engaged in production and exchange for the sake of immediate profit, only the nearest, most immediate results must first be taken into account**.” (my emphasis).

“In relation to nature, as to society, the present mode of production is predominantly concerned only about the immediate, the most tangible result; and then surprise is expressed that the more remote effects of actions directed to this end turn out to be quite different.”

Engels explains very simply and lucidly the content of the struggle and the aims which the Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party has adopted: “… by concentrating wealth in the hands of a minority and dispossessing the huge majority, this instrument” (he meant modern industry) “was destined at first to give social and political domination to the bourgeoisie, but later, to give rise to a class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat **which can end only in the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the abolition of all class antagonisms** (my emphasis – B.A.). But in this sphere too, by long and often cruel experience and by collecting and analysing historical material, we are gradually learning to get a clear view of the indirect, more remote social effects of our production activity, and so are afforded an opportunity to control and regulate these effects as well”.

Sadly, at the moment there are few established workers’ organisations around the world in which these issues are seriously discussed, or can even be raised. The SRWP must be one of the ones where this is possible! Naturally, workers will look for a discussion of aims which look achievable within the current framework of social relations. This is entirely understandable, and gains made within this framework can be very valuable, as workers in the UK and US know.

But the current coming together of a major economic crisis, a major health crisis and a chronic environmental crisis does mean that a body of SRWP members needs to be conscious of the way Engels presented this problem of humanity and nature.

Selecting and putting forward proposals for action

Besides making available some of the best teachings of past socialist leaders, the best way to educate a movement of workers and temper the political consciousness of its members is to develop a systematic programme of demands which enables members to take action over burning everyday issues but in doing so opens the way for a discussion of the wider aims.

In the two recent documents submitted by Comrade Shaheen Khan (*The Coronavirus, Capitalism and the Response of the Working Class* and *Our Perspectives and Our Tasks*), various proposals are made which he probably believed would appeal to workers as solutions to the immediate problems associated with the COVId-19 pandemic and lockdown, but also strengthen their awareness of their own power, which is a necessary preparation for looking for ways to make that power prevail.

The problem is that such demands cannot be successful if they are dreamed up in the heads of one or more intellectuals on the basis of their own plans and aspirations. They have to be anchored also in the minds of, in the first place, those special workers who are going to persuade and lead many others, arguing on the basis of their daily experience, building up their confidence and their communal action with other workers. Sadly, it looks as if Comrade Shaheen Khan has chosen a set of proposals based on a the thoughts in his own head and now casts his bread upon the waters in the hope that it will be returned a hundredfold, whereas it is more likely it will fall on stony ground.

My first reaction (from thousands of miles away in London) was that it is not clear which audience among workers Comrade

Shaheen Khan thinks he is addressing. He has a clear conception of the problems they face, and a fairly detailed set of proposals for dealing with them. But there is no sign of how these proposals could be discussed with the SRWP leadership and membership. Comparing the second document with the first, one can see that some proposals in the first document have been dropped, but there is no account given about why this is so. **That leads me to suspect that the proposals don't really find much traction among workers, because if there was, they would start to change and take on a concrete form as they developed from the "abstract idea" (in Comrade Shaheen Khan's head) towards the "practical idea" (as concrete plans in the hands of workers).**

The contemporary significance of Engels' concept

Dealing with a deep crisis in "the fields of production and exchange" in the 1970s, world capitalism, led by its American arm, chose the deliberate course outlined nearer the beginning of this text. People know it variously as "The Washington Consensus", "supply-side economics", the "Chicago School" and of course "globalisation". While revolutionary socialist movements around the world were being side-lined, defeated, undermined and corrupted, conditions were created for massive but one-sided "development" in the "third" world and China.

Maybe Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Henry Kissinger spared a though for the "remote effects" of their drive to "globalisation" forty years ago. Maybe not. They probably consoled themselves with J M Keynes' dictum that "in the long run we are all dead". Certainly, they are not alive to see the actual results of their actions.

A form of globalisation which thoroughly and properly and thoughtfully shares with the rest of the world the advances which have marked European and North American societies would have been and will be a good thing, because it will eradicate poverty, ignorance and inequality. But it must be done for the

benefit of all future human beings and in consciousness of the "remote effects" of all the actions involved, applying science and human measures to the process. Uncontrolled globalisation in the interests of capital has involved a huge anarchic expansion of "smoke-stack" industries and reliance on oil and coal power, which now destabilises the entire climate of the world. Only now – very late in the game – has capital turned to new forms of energy, and only when it can turn a profit from them.

Capitalist – anarchic – deregulation of global trade and movement of people means a giant city the size of Wuhan has a population which a generation ago mainly lived in the countryside. Adaptation to urban living and the needs of urban hygiene have always been problematic under such circumstances, and it is not clear that the entrepreneurs who have turned Wuhan into a world city prioritise the fostering of urban hygiene and modern culture of life among the whole population. Many workers do not enjoy the full rights of citizenship, and live on the margins. The experience of the European industrial revolution could have been extremely instructive in this regard, but it is not clear how far lessons have been learned from this. Meanwhile around the whole world, developed and "developing", layer after layer of regulation has been stripped away. Bodies with responsibility for public heath have been deprived of experienced personnel and re-purposed or simply abandoned.

Wuhan is so integrated into the world that a local incident where (so far as we can tell) a virus formerly limited to other animals which has adapted to infecting human beings has been carried by infected humans virtually uncontrollably right across the world. Globalisation of trade and general intercourse, without applying the long and painful lessons of modern public health, has exploded beyond any chance of catching and suppressing such an outbreak early on. But it doesn't need to be like this.

The need for socialist globalisation, alert to the "remote consequences" of actions taken, was never greater. But recognition of this fact is only significant if it is embedded in the consciousness of the working class. And we now need to look at some of the factors which affect that consciousness.

The working-class response to the coronavirus crisis

Right across the world, the working-class response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been extraordinary.

When the 2008-2010 "sub-prime" banking collapse hit society with shattering effect, the most painful thing for conscious socialists was to see the bemused and confused response throughout the social layers affected most sharply, evicted home-owners, small businesspeople and laid-off workers. People reacted to their situation by camping in town squares as "indignados", in the "Occupy" movement, engaging in frantic but eventually fruitless debates about what had gone wrong and how to go forward in a different way. The organised working class and its trades unions were put on the back foot. Even talk about the working class – as opposed to undifferentiated "citizens", was denounced as outdated dogmatic nonsense.

Many Marxists will remember the difficult discussions with individuals and groups blown into the air by the effects of the finance crisis who didn't want to be lectured about how the system works by people they suspected of being sectarian word-jugglers.

This may seem ironic to formal thinkers, but right across the US and Europe the last thing many of these people wanted was a Marxist explanation of how the crisis had come about!

(The "Arab Spring" also came as a reaction to the – global – banking crisis and its effects, but although this series of uprisings shared many traits with the "indignados" this movement really did seriously shake governments across the Middle East and North Africa.)

The most exceptional development anywhere in the world after 2008-10 was the magnificent class movement of South African workers unleashed by the massacre of the Marikana miners. This also led to the exceptional decision by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to break the trade union movement's alliance with the ANC and SACP and set out to establish a working-class party based on revolutionary Marxism. This was the only development internationally that adequately reflected the depth of the finance crisis and identified its significance for the working class, but even then NUMSA has had to work hard to get the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party off the ground, and to find a way back to genuine Bolshevism.

In this 2020 crisis the working-class emerges directly as the heroes of the whole of society.

And it is not just the working class as an undifferentiated mass of the population, but the working class in its trades unions which has taken the crisis in hand and made its presence known. This is, in any case, the experience in the UK.

Postal workers here have kept up deliveries right through the lockdown (although they are now instructed to deliver only genuine mail, not the advertising junk-mail they have more recently been obliged to deliver). They emerge as the genuine face of the community where families and pensioners and the chronically ill are penned into their homes. Their union – Union of Communication Workers (UCW) – is engaged in a long-drawn out struggle to defend members' rights and resist the impact of privatisation on Royal Mail.

Unite the Union represents many groups of workers, including bus drivers, who have heroically continued to work so that other "key" workers can get to the hospitals treating virus victims and manufacturing and logistics workers can get to work producing and distributing medicines and equipment.

Employers like Transport for London (TfL) needed to be pushed hard to make sure that drivers are protected from infection and that buses, trains and underground trains are regularly deep cleaned and disinfected. Anger exploded among union members as the death-toll of drivers mounted. The union has won and imposed certain measures of protection for these heroes.

Other Unite members working in sanitation (dust-bin collection) have had to fight for proper Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). From government ministers downwards to local managers, the initial response is always a bare-faced lie, i.e. that the employees have been issued with adequate equipment as laid down in the guidelines and have nothing to complain about. If the equipment wasn't where it was needed, it was on its way. It would arrive tomorrow or the next day. The workers have had to explain each time that COVID-10 isn't "normal" and unless workers have the appropriate emergency PPE when they need it, many of them will get infected and possibly die and another vital service will just collapse.

Workers are starting to stand up and fight this through their unions and they are taking that fight right through the community. And they are often winning because the community is recognising their worth and importance, which has been concealed by decades of deliberate slander, disrespect and being discounted as insignificant (since the Thatcher government smashed the miners' union in 1984-1985 and brought in class-based laws to take away trade union rights).

Lowly-paid supermarket staff have done amazing work keeping stores open and safe and supervising "social distancing" among customers.

And none are more aware of the lie about PPE than National Health Service (NHS) hospital staff. From senior doctors to nurses and on to catering staff, porters and cleaners, they are in minute-by-minute contact with highly infectious

coronavirus patients. So, too, are workers in the care sector who either care for elderly and vulnerable people in care homes or visit such people in their own homes. This group is an undervalued, underpaid and exploited section of the workforce.

They have had to fight tooth and nail to get adequate supplies of PPE, and they have had to face government ministers and hospital managers telling them that it is safe to work with inadequate protection, that they must work with inadequate protection, that fresh PPE is on its way, that the army is rushing PPE to them as we speak and so on and so forth. Many of these key workers have become infected and died. (A recent example of this came in the *Guardian* newspaper, 17 April 2020: "NHS staff told 'wear aprons' as protective gowns run out. Exclusive: U-turn on original guidelines of full-length waterproof gear for high-risk procedures".)

Resistance to COVID-19 has galvanised the mass of society, and "key" workers (and it turns out that large numbers of "mere" workers are "key" to society in one way or another – go figure!) are at the heart of the community response.

Indeed, the right-wing Conservative and Thatcherite Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson, on his way to a hospital intensive care bed with the virus, came on air to assert that "there definitely is such a thing as society". (The Iron Lady herself is said to have asserted the exact opposite view! How things change!). More about thatcher and Thatcherism later.

Naturally, social conditions in the "rich" (I.e. imperialist) nations involve certain working-class gains won over centuries of struggle. In the USA and the UK, the various "lockdown" measures mean millions of workers in "non-essential" trades have been thrown out of work and various types of welfare arrangement have been put in place to keep them fed and supplied with necessities during the "lockdown". We can expect some quite sharp struggles over how this works out; for

example, the government promised there would be no evictions as tenants on “lockdown” ran out of cash for the rent. But, actually, there have been many evictions and some vulnerable people have died. Undocumented refugees are particularly vulnerable in all aspects of their lives. By-and-large, however, most people are unlikely to starve, or at least have the conception that society will not let them starve.

But in many parts of the world workers have not been able to win the right to even a bare existence. A report has been published by the “Haiti Support Group” (here in the UK) under the headline: “Garment factories Re-open in Haiti Despite COVID-19 Fears”. The report, which might have come from any number of countries in Latin America, Africa or Asia, explains: “Garment workers at Haiti’s Caracol industrial park are expected to return to work on 20 April, following an announcement by Prime Minister Joseph Jouthe.”

The report continues: “Many have been left with no pay due to cancelled orders and factory shutdowns, or forced to work in high-risk conditions as factories reopen before the crisis has passed.

“When asked about the reopening of textile factories across Haiti, Georges Sassine, factory owner and president of L’Association des Industries d’Haiti (ADIH), the main organisation of Haiti’s manufacturing sector, has said: ‘**the question was whether to die of hunger or coronavirus**’.”

It is further stated: “In a letter addressed to workers on 3 April, S & H Global informed them that the 50% of their salary promised by the Haitian government had not yet arrived and would only constitute 50% or the already meagre 500 gourdes minimum wage, 5 US Dollars per 8 hour working day (already four times lower than the average cost of living in Haiti).”

“**Prioritising profits over the wellbeing of workers**” (my emphasis), the Korean textile supplier tenants at the

(Caracol) park had originally issued the letter to announce that factory production would recommence on 13 April. While the company stated that government-advised health and safety measures would be implemented (the wearing of masks and hand-washing), local unions and international garment sector NGOs remain unconvinced …”

The rest of this highly-informative report is available on https://haitisupportgroup.org/garment-factories-reopen-haiti-covid19/ .

In this, one of the poorest countries in the Caribbean, class struggle is waged and the working class come to the fore as a major social factor.

As we shall see later, “prioritising profits over the wellbeing of workers”, and the rejection of this attitude, is a serious matter which engages opposition from workers (and wider society). There can be no doubt at all that a profound shift is underway in the relations between the class of factory-owners and bankers and the working class at the heart of the world’s masses.

The coronavirus pandemic is certainly unprecedented in its severity. Its ultimate impact on world economy is difficult to assess at the moment but it will eventually be hugely destructive: things will never look quite the same again. It is the current social and economic conditions prevailing around the world which have turned this new biological hazard (novel Corvid-19) into a massive crisis for every dimension of human life. The origins of the outbreak thus certainly do lie in the character of modern capitalism-imperialism.

By and large the pandemic has revealed that the real “heroes” are the doctors, nurses, hospital technicians, scientific researchers, paramedics, aides, cleaners, transport, sanitation and logistics workers and the many volunteers who have stepped in during “lockdown” to feed, help and support

the vulnerable.

This has produced in the UK at least a different general outlook from the one associated with “globalisation”, the pure capitalist Adam Smith view that my individual commercial success is all that is required for happiness in society. “Neo” liberals like Margaret Thatcher are said to have taken this further, proclaiming that “there is no such thing as society”. The UK has seen a decidedly Thatcherite Prime Minister – Boris Johnson – assert that there certainly is such a thing as society. He had just been successfully treated by the UK National Health Service for coronavirus, and (he was still a bit woozy from the disease) poured fulsome praise upon his foreign-born nurses.

This may only be a passing effect in Mr. Johnson’s case, but it reflects a swing in the general social attitude to workers, and this swing cannot fail to have its effect among workers. The responses of bus and other “key” workers show that it is having an effect. But that effect needs space to develop. It will not be strengthened by calls for “a new Zimmerwald”, but it might be expressed first by an improvement in the general activity and level of involvement of trades union branches and regional and national committees and associated bodies.

It could be reflected in workers getting involved in the Corbyn movement in the Labour Party, if the discussion there can concentrate on issues affecting workers.

Marxist and socialist intellectuals can encourage a discussion of principles by encouraging the development of trade union activity after decades of a down-turn in that sphere.

A real development of mass consciousness needs to happen in that context. Attempts to force the issue by promulgating noisy statements will end up in “phrase-mongering and clowning”. But it doesn’t need to be like that. There is a genuine job of work to do. But it can only be done if the

working class is a material part of our work, not something separate and abstract.

Bob Archer, April 2020

Shaheen Khan (in South Africa): (1) “The Coronavirus, Capitalism and the Working class” and (2) “Our Perspectives and Tasks”. (See below)

Public Reading Rooms (UK): “No Going Back – The COVID-19 Pandemic: Theses”.

The Coronavirus, Capitalism and the response of the working class by Shaheen Khan, 21/03/2020

The spread of the coronavirus to all countries of the world in the past week has laid to rest any sceptic view that this is but a normal flu and does not require special attention from socialists and the working class. As the pandemic spreads across the globe, the global health emergency is rapidly evolving into a crisis of the entire existing world social order. As the death toll rises, major cities are in lockdown, and hundreds of millions of people are faced with the loss of their jobs and incomes; the social, economic, political and moral bankruptcy of the capitalist system is being utterly exposed. Capitalism not only creates the conditions for the existence of viruses and pandemics but the failure of the major capitalist governments to prepare for a pandemic is resulting in thousands, and potentially millions, of deaths, “The number of cases is already approaching 300,000 and it is rising rapidly. The number of deaths has passed 11,000 and is increasing exponentially. A pandemic of this character was both foreseeable and foreseen. However, the most basic requirements to secure the health and safety of the population were ignored”.

The capitalist system is in deep crisis and the rule of the

capitalist class on a global scale is in jeopardy. For the second time in little over a decade, the world economy is in a state of breakdown, this time on a far greater scale than 2008. In 2008, the downturn in real estate—by way of subprime to funding markets and from there to the balance sheets of major banks—threatened an economic collapse. In the winter of 2008-2009, more than 750,000 job losses were recorded every month—a total of 8.7 million over the course of the recession. Major industrial companies like GM and Chrysler stumbled toward bankruptcy, and "for the global economy, it unleashed the largest contraction in international trade ever seen".

It is too early to confidently predict the course of the economic downturn facing the world economy now due to the coronavirus. But a recession is inevitable. The global manufacturing industry was already shaken in 2019. All the elements of a new financial crisis have been in place for several years and the coronavirus is the spark or trigger of the stock market crisis, not the cause. . The stock market bubble is bursting before our very eyes and the *Financial Times* provides an estimate for the three largest investment funds, BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street, whose market value of assets is estimated to have fallen by $2.8 trillion in just under a month.

With the coronavirus spreading exponentially across the globe, the world's major economies will be shut down for at least several months. Factories are closing, shops, gyms, bars, schools, colleges, and restaurants shutting. Early HYPERLINK "https://www.epi.org/blog/coronavirus-shock-will-likely-claim-3-million-jobs-by-summer/" indicators suggest job losses in the United States could top 1 million per month between now and June. That would be a sharper downturn than in 2008-2009. For sectors like the airline industry, the impact will be far worse. In the oil industry, the prospect of market contraction has unleashed a ruthless price war among OPEC, Russia, and shale producers. This will stress the heavily indebted energy

sector. If price wars spread, we could face a ruinous cycle of debt-deflation that will jeopardize the world's huge pile of HYPERLINK "https://www.ft.com/content/27cf0690-5c9d-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4" corporate debt, which is twice as large as it was in 2008. International trade will sharply contract. Investment bank Goldman Sachs announced on Friday that it expects the US economy to contract by an unprecedented 24 percent in the second quarter of the year (April-June), as production and service industries grind to a halt. This would be the largest quarterly contraction in US history, far surpassing even what took place during the Great Depression. The International Labour Organization reports that up to 25 million workers worldwide could lose their jobs over the next several months, but this is a vast underestimation. In the United States alone, 14 million jobs in the leisure and hospitality sector will be affected by mandatory shutdowns. Moody's Analytics reports that nearly 80 million jobs, or half of the US economy, are at risk.

While the pandemic has triggered the crisis, the causes of the economic breakdown lie far deeper. The process of financialization—the systemic and unrestrained separation of the accumulation of staggering levels of wealth from real productive activity—created a massively unstable global economy, based on the unlimited transfusion of liquidity by the central banks (i.e. quantitative easing) to drive up the equity markets to ever more unrealistic and unsustainable levels. The capitalist system is being exposed as a society that subordinates everything to the obscene greed and corruption of the oligarchy. An indescribable level of selfishness, egotism, and indifference to human life pervades the ruling class, which treats the lives of workers as dispensable.

Social opposition is growing internationally. Wildcat strikes and walkouts in Michigan and Ohio forced a temporary shutdown

of the North American auto industry, as workers refused to let the auto companies “kill them on the line” for the sake of profit. There is seething anger amongst the working class and soon we will see mass explosions in different parts of the world. The capitalist crisis and the pandemic will not silence the class but stir its basic instinct to struggle and in the process develop the necessary revolutionary consciousness to deal decisively with the capitalist system.

Capitalist Crisis, the Austerity Budget and the State of Disaster address

In South Africa the Apartheid-Capitalist system is crashing right in front of our eyes. Mining is in shambles, finance under massive attack from digital money and a very weak manufacturing base. The energy sector is barely limping along and the ‘negotiated settlement’ has lost its legitimacy and has expired.

The State of Disaster address by President Cyril Ramaphosa on the evening of the 15th March 2020 was the first serious attempt by the South African state to respond to the Coronavirus which had already infected more than 150 000 people internationally at that time, including South African citizens who were stranded in China for almost three months. Nothing much was said about the virus by the President at his State of the Nation (SONA) address on the 13th February 2020 nor by the Minister of Finance, Tito Mboweni at his budget speech on the 26th February 2020. In fact the budget speech massively cut costs on basic social services in general and health in particular. They did this knowing full well that the Coronavirus would soon be upon us with a public health system that was in a total state of decay.

The budget speech of the Minister of Finance came straight out of the Treasuries ‘ Economic Strategy Document’ which is a rightwing, neoliberal, austerity budget geared to slashing

the public wage bill and cutting costs on basic social services in general and the public health services in particular. This was a mean budget directed against the working class and poor! Health services have been hammered by neoliberal austerity measures for a quarter of a century where the South African working class has carried the burden of a range of disease areas like malnutrition, child mortality, Tuberculosis, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity. Above this can we forget the devastation wrecked on the population of over 350 000 deaths from HIV and Aids under the Mbeki regime?

This budget which continues to be implemented exposes the hypocrisy of the President's appeal that the coronavirus "will unite us and bring us closer". Behind this appeal for national unity and a common approach to the problems we face as a society lies the greed of the ruling class which is seen in the kind of decisions they have made to address the virus. These decisions threaten the safety of the working class and poor of our society. Cyril Ramaphosa, Tito Mboweni and the entire leadership of the ANC government are responsible for any death of any worker from the Coronavirus!

The Context of our struggle

COVID-19 arrives in South Africa against a public health system that is in deep and structural crisis.

South Africa has a split health system, one for the rich and one for the poor. Even those working class people who have managed to buy themselves out of the public health system find that the supply of health services is precarious as they run out of benefits on a regular basis, falling back into the collapsing public health system.

The health system of the rich, a private health system has all the facilities needed to respond to COVID-19 – testing facilities for the virus, laboratories that can generate

results quickly and efficiently, clean hospitals, access to water, a stable supply of electricity. On the other side we have hospitals of the working class – water that runs on and off, unstable electricity supply, a demoralised and apathetic staff (who themselves do not use these hospital facilities as they have state medical aid), hospitals and clinics with little or no medication, chaotic administration and laboratories that are ill-equipped to deliver reliable services.

The reason for the high burden of disease in South Africa is because we are the most unequal and one of the poorest countries in the world. The South African working class is a poverty stricken class where the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCD's) is three times higher than in countries of similar levels of development. The South African working class had higher levels of precariousness and systemic exposure to poverty than their poorer counterparts in other parts of the world.

South Africa is also a country trapped in deep, systemic and structural violence. This plays out in our townships where gangsters rule and violence is directed not only at communities but more especially on women and girls. Women and girls while in the frontline of these attacks are not the only ones. The 'foreigner' is often used as a cover to face assault for the austerity measures of the ruling class.

The epidemic of unemployment faces large sections of the working class, where 40% of the population and 50% of the youth are unemployed. This unemployment level is a catastrophe.

The class divisions in our society, in every aspect of life is a result not of any misunderstanding nor of a 'lack of will'. It is a product of the rule of a comprador bourgeois who protect and advance the interests of a white monopoly capitalist ruling class. This comprador bourgeois carried out

the massacre at Marikana and is conducting a vicious battle to privatise the SOE's, Eskom, SAA, the railways while at the same time cutting the wages of public sector workers.

It is time for revolutionary politics and a new strategy to meet the social and political needs of the masses. It is time to unite the working class, the employed and unemployed behind the revolutionary party, the SRWP which must be ready to take on capitalism and defeat it.

Our Strategic Perspective

There are times in history when sudden events – natural disasters, economic collapses, pandemics, wars, famines – change everything. They change politics, they change economics and they change public opinion in drastic ways. Socialists regard these as "trigger events." During a trigger event, things that were previously unimaginable quickly become reality, as the social and political map is remade. On the one hand, major triggers are rare; but on the other, we have seen them regularly in recent decades. Events such as 9/11, the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial crash of 2008 have all had major repercussions on national life, leading to political changes that would have been difficult to predict beforehand. COVID-19, the coronavirus pandemic, is by far the biggest trigger event of our generation. It is a combination of natural epidemic and economic collapse happening at the same time.

The task in the days, weeks and months ahead is to build a conscious socialist leadership in the working class throughout the world.

Every event of the past week has demonstrated the necessity of putting an end to capitalism and fighting for socialism. The pandemic exposes in concrete form the inability of a society based on private profit, on the endless accumulation of wealth, and on the antagonisms of nation-states, to address

any of the problems of mass society.

We must appreciate that the Coronavirus is not a medical crisis but ***it is primarily a social and political crisis!*** While big pharma rush to find a vaccine, which will take a year and a half to test for its safety and veracity in human beings, the working class, particularly its leadership, has to *organise* society so as to slow down and finally reverse transmission of the virus. Even after a vaccine has passed clinical trials we will have to contend with global monopoly capital and its desire to make billions out of it.

The immediate question is raising the **consciousness** of the working class and poor and developing a sense of social solidarity. This is done through elementary interventions like pamphlets, posters, television, community radio stations, loud hailing etc. This must take place at every level of the party and must take place not only at the homes/living quarters of workers but also at schools, churches, taxi ranks etc.

This approach on organisation has to take account of the danger of spreading the virus and must consist of *localised organising* in small groups and meetings of small groups that can address issues. As our influence in the communities grows and more people join up the small groups themselves will grow both broader and deeper into the class.

The aim is to form Solidarity Action Committees (SAC's) which are local neighbourhood structures. These structures once formed must conduct only small localised meetings in communities so as to protect communities from spreading the virus. The success of our endeavour to build such structures depend on how widespread our organising is and how deep we can reach into the communities in the first place.

The immediate aim of these SAC is to create health structures for anti-coronavirus defence in the working class. We must

create social and physical infrastructure that the working class can access in the struggle against the virus. These structures are those we demand from the state and those we set up on our own through our organised communities.

The working class demands:

Immediate and *full access to water and sanitation* – a major defence against the virus is washing hands with soap on a regular basis. We must demand that the state set up thousands if not millions of temporary hand washing facilities across South Africa. This must start with the immediate provision of water to informal settlements, taxi ranks, train stations, shopping malls, clinics, schools, libraries, community halls etc. All places of employment must be compelled to install water/soap points or sanitisers. Our trade unions must monitor this. The armed forces must be organised to deliver water to all areas where there is no water available.

That all *hospitals to be nationalised* and private healthcare facilities to be abolished. – away with the two-tier health system!

A *coronavirus testing system that is free* – we reject the payment of a fee for testing for the virus and it must be free to all people at all facilities, whether they be private or public hospitals and clinics. The immediate roll out of testing stations to all areas of need, where people can access them within walking distance.

The state must immediately *take command of all laboratories* – this will allow a more efficient and well run system of testing where results will be released timeously.

Production and free distribution of *appropriate masks* – every person in the country must have an appropriate mask to protect themselves against the virus. The state must set up mass production facilities for the production of masks immediately.

The production of *essential medical equipment* – essential medical equipment like drips, protective clothing etc needs to be produced on a large scale immediately. These will be critical for establishing temporary quarantine facilities. This will only be able to be done on the basis that such factories be expropriated as is taking place in many countries of the world to deal with the virus.

Feeding schemes in townships to meet the needs of children who are not any longer at school as well as hungry and malnourished members of the community. Set up key feeding points at churches, community halls and other spaces.

Food parcels for all those people who are ill and in isolation or quarantine.

A *basic income grant* for the unemployed – the working class and their children suffer high levels of malnutrition and are food insecure. In order to fight the virus the immune system must be boosted by nourishing food which the unemployed and poor do not have access to.

The *closure of all non-essential production*, with full income to those affected (initially for one month, but longer if necessary); safe working conditions in industries essential to the functioning of society.

No dismissal or retrenchment of workers who are ill. Guaranteed paid leave for all workers who are ill or for firms that have stopped operating or are on short time. This must not impact the leave due to workers nor the UIF payments . Companies must make extra-ordinary arrangements to ensure that they carry these workers till they can return to work.

The State implement strict *adherence to WHO rules* governing cleanliness and safety in the workplace.

The state make *working class transport safer* – the working class travel in taxis and trains that are overcrowded. While

laws governing this has been promulgated communities structures together with taxi associations must monitor this to ensure it is implemented.

Cut interest rates to zero for the duration of the epidemic and cancel all home loan and debt repayments for the next three months or until things get back to normal.

We must defend the working class! The building of Solidarity Action Committees must proceed immediately. We must explain the middle class programme of 'self-isolation' does not defend the working class against infection from the virus. This approach must be replaced by a more holistic approach that focuses on preparing infrastructure that will be needed to deal with thousands of cases that need isolation. With our communities we must identify facilities that can be converted into holding spaces for community members that need to be isolated or quarantined. These facilities include churches, community halls, universities, colleges etc. Some of these like universities already have basic infrastructure like running water, canteens for cooking, electricity etc.

We will work carefully and ensure we do not contribute to spreading the virus. This means we will take special care in the way we organise in small groups, using electronic and social media methods where possible to reduce direct contact. While we will take extreme care and consider every organisational move we make, we will not be paralysed by fear of the virus nor infection!

We will move from the defence to the offensive in time! The building of SAC's is in line with the SRWP Central Committee resolution to lead the struggles of the working class and build party branches in the cauldron of battle. The coronavirus comes at a time when the capitalist system is in such deep crisis that it is possible to prepare to rid society of it and build a socialist humanitarian society.

Shaheen Khan

21/03/2020

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) “The Spread of the pandemic and the lessons of the past week”, 21/03/2020

(Financial Times, “World’s three biggest fund houses shed $2.8tn of assets” HYPERLINK “https://www.ft.com/content/438854a8-63b0-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68” https://www.ft.com/content/438854a8-63b0-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68 published on 15 March 2020).

A. Tooze, “Is the Coronavirus Crash Worse than the 2008 Financial Crisis?”, 18/03/2020

WSWS, “The Spread of the pandemic and the lessons of the past week”, 21/03/2020

Banda Aswell, whatsapp message 11/03/2020

Khanya College, “In the Eye of the Storm”, 15/03/2020

E. Toussaint, “The Capitalist pandemic, Coronavirus and the Economic Crisis”, 19/03/2020

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Our Perspectives and Our Tasks by Shaheen Khan 17/04/2020

“Theory, my friend, is grey, but green is the eternal tree of life” (Goethe)

This was one of the favourite quotes of Lenin who combined the science of Marxism with the art of struggle, how to act. Such a moment lies before us today and what we need to do is not to repeat ‘formulas’ but deal with the *concrete* economic and political conditions of the particular *period* of the historical process. In line with this we must not forget that Marx and Engels famously reiterated ad naseum that “Our theory

is not a dogma, but a guide to action".

The Capitalist System is in deep crisis

We are not going to deal with an in-depth analysis of the capitalist crisis, its economic, social and political character as this has been done by many analysts and political groups. We wish only to outline some elements which we believe are of decisive importance:

The capitalist system is in its deepest crisis ever and the rule of the capitalist class on a global scale is in jeopardy. What is increasingly becoming clear is that this crisis is more than a mere recession but a deep depression, as even the bourgeois IMFBlog outlines in its April *World Economic Outlook* "we project global growth in 2020 to fall -3 percent. This is a downgrade of 6.3 percentage points from January 2020, a major revision over a very short period. This makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis."

The capitalist class will of course blame the pandemic for the crisis of the system. This is not true as the the pandemic emerged at a crucial turning point in world politics. In 2019 two key developments of historic proportions took place. First, the most severe slump of the capitalist world economy began. And, secondly, a global wave of class struggles and popular uprisings were taking place in many countries simultaneously and it covered nearly all continents.

The bourgeois are panicking as the world has changed dramatically in three months and "The magnitude and speed of collapse in activity that has followed is unlike anything experienced in our lifetime".

In South Africa the Apartheid-Capitalist system is crashing right in front of our eyes. Mining is in shambles, finance under massive attack from digital money and virtual banking and this on top of a very weak manufacturing base. The energy

sector is barely limping along and the ‘negotiated settlement’ has lost its legitimacy and has expired.

COVID-19 arrives in South Africa against a public health system that is in deep and structural crisis. South Africa has a split health system, one for the rich and one for the poor. Even those members of the working class who have managed to buy themselves out of the public health system find that the supply of health services is precarious as they run out of benefits on a regular basis, falling back into the collapsed public health system. Unemployment has reached epidemic proportions, where 40% of the population and 50% of the youth are unemployed. This is a catastrophe.

The class divisions in our society is a result not of any misunderstanding nor of a ‘lack of will’. It is a product of the rule of a comprador bourgeois who protect and advance the interests of a white monopoly capitalist ruling class. This comprador bourgeois carried out the massacre at Marikana and is conducting an austerity programme as seen in the vicious battle to privatise the SOE’s, Eskom, SAA, the railways while at the same time cutting the wages of public sector workers.

The Scientific Model is a bourgeois model

The capitalist government of Cyril Ramaphosa has taken the nation into its confidence and placed before the nation the medical/scientific basis for the lockdown. While this makes perfect sense from a scientific point of view it does not address the social character of the problem. Bourgeois science divides life into separate categories and the outline of the medical team in its analysis fails to address the question in a way that provides social solutions. In fact the epidemiologist concludes that since we are to return to normal conditions of economic and social activity the pandemic is inevitably going to kill thousands of people, particularly the elderly but also those that are immuno-compromised. What he is not saying is that those who are going to die are the black

working class who are most vulnerable to the spread of the epidemic.

The lockdown in bourgeois hands is a hydra-headed monster. On the one hand it is necessary to ensure the safety of the population through 'flattening the curve'. On the other hand, because of the capitalist system, the working class and poor have been reduced to high levels of hunger and suffering. The condition of the employed working class is subject to claims and processes from the UIF which has placed the class in a very precarious position. The unemployed who eked out a living through precarious and part-time work have been thrown into abject poverty. The lockdown in its current form is untenable and represents a hell-hole for the working class and poor. The class is beginning to respond to this in the form of food protests and fighting the police who are part of a high-handed repressive bourgeois approach to the lockdown.

The bourgeois is in a tizz, caught between the competing interests of its different fractions. While initially frightened by the prospect of mass deaths of its labour force (and that is the reason why the lockdown took place in the first instance), it has already started non-essential productive activities like opening the mining industry . It plans a phased return to work and releasing the lockdown, even before it is safe to do so, which may cause the rampant spread of the epidemic and the death of millions of black workers. The cynicism of this is mind boggling – they place profits ahead of people!

A revolutionary and socialist approach to the pandemic

Lenin as well as Trotsky liked to quote Napoleon who said "*On s'engage et puis … on voit*." ("First engage in a serious battle and then see what happens.") Our task is not to wait until things unfold before us but to analyse, understand and intervene to change things in such a way that it serves the interests of the working class and oppressed.

These are difficult times, not only for the bourgeois but also for the leadership of the working class. Many bourgeois economists and NGO's have been making recommendations to the government to adopt a Keynesian economic approach rather than the neoliberal path they have been following. This is a nationalist capitalist trajectory which does not in any way serve the interests of the working class. The NUMSA open letter to the President is different as it has as its main consideration the effects of the lockdown on the jobs bloodbath that will flow from it. However we think that it fails to address the question from a class struggle perspective and remains an economistic approach to the question. We think it is not the approach to follow.

The salient issues we must consider are:

While there may be questions related to the medical/scientific outline presented by Professor Salim Abdool Karim his presentation confirms that the lockdown has been successful in keeping down infections and the spreading of the virus. More so the study indicates that if the lockdown is lifted too soon there will be an exponential increase in the number of infections and consequential death of thousands of people. These thousands of people will be black working class people living in townships and urban settlements. The danger of the NUMSA open letter is that it may expose the workers in the manufacturing sector to this danger. Already businesses that have been operating are reporting COVID-19 infections, so too prisons, police stations, the SANDF and private hospitals. The big bourgeoisie are very unhappy with the lockdown as seen in the responses of Trump, Bolsanaro and our own Democratic Alliance. They want to return as soon as possible to business as usual through a phased approach. Their concern is the profitability of their system, not the lives of people, particularly the working class and poor.

As socialists we cannot agree with the lockdown in its current form; ours. While we recognise the essential need for

physical distancing we also understand the absence of 'social needs' that is causing the working class to experience great difficulty and suffer under conditions of the lockdown. While there are a myriad of social issues to be addressed the immediate needs are that of food, a basic income, healthcare and the question of retrenchments and job losses.

The working class is not taking this lying down. Hunger and the insecurity of life is leading to conditions of revolt brewing in the class. These are the molecular processes where the class is gradually beginning to comprehend the problems arising from the social crisis. Consciousness is determined by conditions.

A revolutionary party basis its tactics on a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness. While the party must impress through its propaganda and agitation (media/newspaper/pamphlets) the dangers of the epidemic and the need for physical distancing we must begin to take leadership of the mass protest movement that is gaining momentum. The working class on its own is fighting and breaking down the parameters of the bourgeois lockdown and we need to direct this anger in the right direction and to the right quarters.

The mass anger must be directed at the ruling class, the ANC government and the provincial authorities to demand a right to a decent life under the current conditions. This must include the following:

'***Food for All' –*** we demand a mass government funded food distribution programme. This must take place on a weekly basis with food parcels allocated and distributed to all people living in working class communities. This must also include all those people who are ill and in isolation or quarantine. We also demand immediate *feeding schemes in townships* to meet the needs of children who are not any longer at school as well as hungry and malnourished members of the

community. Set up key feeding points at churches, community halls and other spaces.

A '***Basic Income Grant***' for the working class employed and unemployed, for the middle classes including small business people who are facing the brunt of the lockdown. The funding for this must come from the reserves held by the Reserve Bank and the super-profits from the Mining, Industrial and Banking sector.

The '***Nationalisation of all Hospitals***' –all private healthcare facilities to be abolished, away with the two-tier health system! A *coronavirus testing system that is free* – we reject the payment of a fee for testing for the virus and demand a humanitarian programme of mass testing which must be free to all people at all facilities, whether they be private or public hospitals and clinics. The immediate roll out of testing stations to all areas of need, where people can access them within walking distance. The state must immediately *take command of all laboratories* – this will allow a more efficient and well run system of testing where results will be released timeously. The production of *essential medical equipment* – essential medical equipment like drips, protective clothing etc needs to be produced on a large scale immediately. This will only be able to be done on the basis that such factories be expropriated as is taking place in many countries of the world to deal with the virus. The immediate establishment of temporary quarantine facilities.

'***Full Pay for all Workers! No Retrenchments and No loss of Jobs'*** – we insist that only the most essential of services focussed on food production, health equipment production and those workers involved in any other essential activity be allowed to work under safe and hygienic conditions (monitored by labour and health inspectors and the trade unions). The pandemic is caused by capitalism and the capitalist class must bear responsibility for it. Workers must be paid their full salary and responsibility for claiming wages from the special

UIF fund must fall on the bosses. This must not impact the leave due to workers nor the UIF payments . We will not accept any retrenchments and all work on hand must be divided between all the workers without loss in wages. Those enterprises that close down must be Nationalised under Workers Control. This must become the clarion call of the trade union movement! Guaranteed paid leave for all workers who are ill.

'Social Responsibility Programme' – there must be immediate and *full access to water and sanitation* – a major defence against the virus is washing hands with soap on a regular basis. We demand the immediate provision of water to informal settlements, taxi ranks, train stations, shopping malls, clinics, schools, libraries, community halls etc. While the state has started such a programme we must insist it be rolled out to every area in the country. The production and free distribution of *appropriate masks and sanitising material*–the state must set up mass production facilities for the production of masks and sanitising material immediately. The state make *working class transport safer* – the working class travel in taxis and trains that are overcrowded. While laws governing this has been promulgated communities structures together with taxi associations must monitor this to ensure it is implemented. *Cut interest rates* to zero for the duration of the epidemic and cancel all home loan and debt repayments for the next three months or until things get back to normal. *Stop all evictions and rent payments* for the duration of the lockdown. *Immediately reduce the cost of airtime and data by 50% across all networks* – this must be done immediately to facilitate access to online learning for all children. Stop *the brutal repressive tactics of the police and army!* These people must perform useful tasks and not carry out the repressive agenda of the ruling class and the madman placed in charge of them. They can be useful in the distribution of food and water and other essential tasks.

Our Tasks!

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” K. Marx, HYPERLINK “https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm” Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852)

What is very clear is that Capitalism is a system in extreme decay; climate change and the destruction of nature is the source of the epidemic and this on top of the biggest depression in the history of capitalism. The capitalist class is in a state of utter confusion and desperation as to how to address this triple crisis, but what comes naturally to it is to shift the burden onto the backs of the working class and poor. Already mass retrenchments, growing levels of unemployment, deepening inequality, impoverishment and veritable hunger of the working class and poor pock-mark our society. The working class and its organisations, primarily the SRWP, must make a choice – either the class is totally decimated and disorganised by these conditions or we fight back and begin a serious and organised defence of the class! The very conditions of existence of the working class is at stake and so too the future generations.

We must immediately organise the following ***Campaigns***:

A ‘Food for All’ campaign – is a call for a mass government funded food distribution programme. The working class and poor are already running out of food and soon their hunger will be criminalized. We must anticipate mass food riots and looting which will be harshly dealt with by the state through a declaration of a state of emergency and or the imposition of martial law.

A ‘Basic Income Grant’ campaign – the unemployed have no source of income and the salaries of the working class have

been cut.

A ‘Single National Health System’ campaign – a fight for the nationalisation of private health care facilities so that a national health response to the epidemic can be rolled out.

A ‘No Retrenchments, No Job Losses, Full Wages’ campaign – the working class is under severe attack and the bosses are effecting restructuring of their enterprises through retrenchments and cutting of salaries of workers. The very integrity of the working class as a social entity depends on our ability to win this fight.

A ‘Social Responsibility Campaign’ – full access to water and sanitation, production and distribution of masks on a mass scale, stop evictions and rent payments, zero interest rates, redcue the cost of airtime and data, an end to repressive tactics of the police and army, use the resources of the Reserve bank and the super-profits of the big Monopolies tied up in the banks for a social responsibility programme.

Our ***Organisational Tasks***:

We must defend the working class!

We must call on the working class to form Workers Committees in work places and Solidarity Action Committees (SAC’s) in every township and village. We must explain our programme of demands and get these committees to lead the fight for such a programme. As far as the virus is concerned we must explain that the middle class programme of ‘self-isolation’ does not work for the working class and poor. We call for ***physical distancing and social solidarity***! With our communities we must identify facilities that can be converted into holding spaces for community members that need to be isolated or quarantined. These facilities include churches, community halls, universities, colleges etc. Some of these like universities already have basic infrastructure like running water, canteens for cooking, electricity etc.

We must lead the struggles that are currently unfolding in the townships!

The working class and poor are starving under conditions of the lockdown. While a lockdown is beneficial as far as the spreading of the virus is concerned, it cannot be that people must go hungry and literally starve to death. We must get involved directly in these struggles waged by communities and pose the questions as outlined in our programme. We must also be sensitive to local issues that may arise.

From defence to offense! The coronavirus comes at a time when the capitalist system is in such deep crisis that mass scale struggles of the class may erupt soon. These are the important moments in history when revolutionary parties are tested. The building of SAC's are embryonic forms of Soviets, 'Worker Councils', that spring up as the organised expression of the working class in struggle. While we may be far off from this becoming generalised, we must lay the foundations for democratic working class organisations where our party cadre are leading the fight. This will also allow us to build party branches in the cauldron of battle.

Forward to the defence of the working class!

Forward to the Socialism!

Aluta Continua!

Shaheen Khan 17/04/2020

T. Cliff 'Building the Party'.

IMFBlog "The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression.

RCIT : The COVID-19 Global Counterrevolution: What It Is and How to Fight It, *A Marxist analysis and strategy for the revolutionary struggle*

ibid

Banda Aswell, whatsapp message 11/03/2020

RCIT: The COVID-19 Global Counterrevolution: What It Is and How to Fight It *A Marxist analysis and strategy for the revolutionary struggle*

International Appeal from Namibia Fishermen United

Workers International is proud to circulate this appeal for international solidarity with the fishermen of Namibia.

Open letter to Namibian Nation

New Issue 13 Die Werker out now!

The latest issue (Oct 2019) of Die Werker

Inside this issue:
Onslaught on the working class.
Transnamib will not listen.
The Workers Advice Centre (WAC) was instructed by Namibian workers to conduct three foundational investigations. It summarises the most Demonstrative facts of the semi- colonial dilemmas and atrocities.

Unresolved contradictions come to bite again.
Namibia Fishermen United Association to: working class organisations, the judges of Namibia – petition.
Electronic voting system proven a national scam.
Greetings to the SWANU on its 60th anniversary.

A powerful manifesto and a serious appeal

As the Workers Revolutionary Party of Namibia submits the Manifesto reproduced below to voters in the 2019 National Assembly Elections, reports flood in from around the globe of movements by the masses in Iraq, Lebanon, Chile and elsewhere in direct and open opposition to poverty and exploitation and the corruption and economic mis-management of their 'own' venal governments acting as the local agents of imperialist powers and interests.

They follow on from the events of the "Arab Spring" earlier in the decade and the more recent echoes of these movements in Tunisia and Sudan.

These movements are impressive in their scope and energy and their ability, especially since in Iraq and Lebanon they unite sectors of the population hitherto separated by religious and ethnic affiliations.

Powerful as they are, however, all these movements are hampered by the lack of a political programme and of a well-thought-out strategy to alleviate the suffering expressed in their simple and compelling demands.

In a few boldly-drawn paragraphs, the Namibian WRP Manifesto

sketches out the main lines of that programme and underscores the rightly central role which the working class is called upon to play within such movements, how it links to other parts of the masses and what targets it can set itself to ensure future progress.

Workers International to Rebuild the Fourth International is extremely proud to submit the Manifesto to the consideration of serious socialists everywhere. Our comrades in Namibia have established significant roots among mineworkers, fishery workers, pensioners, homeowners and tenants and more.

The Namibia WRP are experiencing a wave of media and other public interest in their Manifesto. They need resources to spread it far and wide. Workers International will provide whatever support it can so that they can send material, speakers and organisers the length and breadth of the country in the election campaign. Please help us:
account details:
The Correspondence Society
acc no: 20059400
sort: 60 83 01
payments from outside UK would need IBAN number:
GB93NWBK60023571418024

THE CONTEXT OF THE 2019 NATIONAL ELECTIONS

Namibia is an example of a Comprador State. In a political context the word “comprador” is used to describe an agent having control over a nation’s workforce by acting on behalf of foreign masters. In Namibia it means the Namibian government having control over the working people on behalf of foreign and capitalist masters.

Using law enforcement agencies, the care-taker regime since 1990 has systematically destroyed the legal rights and gains of the working class through legislation and corruption. At the behest and in favour of corporate business, these

agencies, which include the Office of the Labour Commissioner and the Courts of Law, disregard the laws concerning the rights of workers.

The State is destroying the nation's infrastructure (roads, hospitals and schools) by a lack of maintenance and brazen theft. Our education system is proof thereof. The adage "education is the greatest equalizer" remains out of reach for the masses, where enrolment in private schools is reserved for children of the middle class and the children of the working class and the poor (peasants) receive sub-standard 'location' education.

The State's express policy on the land issue is "no land to the poor". The plight of those who lost their land to imperialists is not addressed by the care-taker regime. On the contrary, the state further disowned the impoverished communities by seizing their remaining snippets of land.

The judiciary is subservient to the same masters, foreign and local corporate business; banks, industries and capitalists. It destroys the rule of law.

The *modus operandi* of the imperialists and international corporations in conjunction with the State is to exploit the workers by means of low wages, hazardous work conditions and the blatant disregard of labour laws. This practise is common in southern Africa.

The imperialists and capitalists have a vested interest in our presidential and national assembly elections. Our elections are a farce. It is run and controlled by the Indian Army and nullified our sovereignty. Both the registration of voters and voting by the electronic machines are a mockery. Voter registrations are duplicated. Voters can cast their votes multiple times.

Since independence these farcical elections are approved by the USA, EU, AU, SADEC and the IEC as "free and fair" in the

name of ‘political continuity’ to serve their interests and to ensure the unbridled exploitation of the colonies.

Under the Comprador State, Namibia as a whole is disintegrating by the day. The prospects for the nation are a continuously lowering material and cultural standard of living. The vast resources of fish, minerals (strategic and precious), oil and gas reserves, and the most essential resource, the land of the people, are corruptly sold to foreign masters.

The State, bankrupted by rampant looting of the Treasury, is further intensifying its insolvency by turning the country into a tax haven for money launderers. Industries operating in Namibia are registered for tax purposes elsewhere, where they pay no taxes in any event.

There is no HOPE, only DESPERATION unless the programme of the workers’ party is realised.

PROGRAMME

The only force which can turn the economic and human wastage around is the organised working class.

The WRP as the vanguard of that organisation is participating in the 2019 National Elections for no other reason, but to throw light on the main issues wracking this nation and the Southern African working people and to propagate its proposals to achieve working class organisation to fight the scourge.

It harbours no illusions about the mockery of elections which will once more yield results contrived by the Indian State in collusion with the Namibian State.

ISSUES

1.Plundering of natural resources

Namibia’s coastline is unguarded. This allows for unlimited

exploitation of marine resources. Also, this resource is sold to imperialist countries (South Africa and Spain) by the State on behalf of individuals.

2.The land question

The majority of Namibians have no access to land. Dispossession is absolute and total. The Comprador State has gone as far as legislating the Traditional Authorities Act 25 of 2000, which prohibits communities from owning their land. The so-called traditional authorities have no authority or jurisdiction over land.

The stated policy of the regime is, “no land to the poor”.

3.Labour situation

Legislation, pervasive corruption, non-policies and dysfunctional administration and executive combine to set off unbelievable levels of unemployment with literally hundreds of youth rushing for single job openings.

The incumbent regime is oblivious of mineral and natural reserves of priceless minerals (strategic and precious) and massive self-generating resources such as marine and other natural resources. The greatest source of life, land, is squandered away in the same manner.

The obscene squandering of all these resources for laughable bribes by national and international capital leaves the nation abused and bewildered.

PROGRAMME

The WRP uses these elections to articulate its clarion call to the working class to organise at all levels to declare war on **the destruction of the nation through the destruction of its sovereignty**, its self-determination and its liberation, etc.

The programme of the WRP calls on the working class to rebuild

their unions in the fishing, mining sectors and industrial and commercial fields under the guidance of the workers' party. This rebuilding shall take place in the process of arresting the unadulterated exploitation of the country by such demands as opening the books of corporations from mines to factories, and from banks to insurance companies; a public audit of the resources exploited and taken out of this country; the cessation of the money laundering mechanism put in place by the Comprador regime; the derogation of labour rights through legislation and corruption; and, a national review of the de-education of the youth.

The WRP programme calls on the working class to organise at all levels to optimise the utility of their resources; the optimum utilisation of these massive resources to create permanent jobs, to demand rational industrialisation demanded by the total human and technical and natural resources at its disposal.

The WRP call on the working class to treat issues affecting women, men, youth, homosexuals, etcetera as issues affecting the working class as a whole and not issues to be separated.

The working class has no interest in the designs of the black and Khoisan middle classes to step into the shoes of the white landowners by laying claim to the lands of the people. Its sole interest is to restore the collective property of the disowned communities which was collectively disowned. The WRP advise the working class and poor peasantry to call for a national land conference to discuss the restoration of legality in the country by restoration of illegally expropriated lands. (The peasants never held individual title, they held collective ownership. Both the black and white middle class baulk at the idea of a historical inquiry into the land issue in Southern Africa.)

ONLY the ORGANISED working class armed with a programme for all the working people of the NATION can take power and lead

the country out of extreme backwardness and squalor in the midst of untold wealth.

ONLY the ORGANISED working class led by a workers' party can break the suffocation of the nation by imperialism.

WORKERS REVOLUTIONARY PARTY (WRP)

TO REBUILD THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

A political party duly registered in terms of the electoral laws of the Republic of Namibia

4479 Dodge Avenue, Khomasdal P.O. Box 3349 Windhoek

Tel: 061-260647

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Defend Casual Workers Advice Office in Johannesburg!

> *On Monday evening 2 September 2019, during a campaign of xenophobic violence, a 200-strong gang wrecked the premises of the Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO) in Johannesburg, South Africa. The door was broken open, glass was shattered and the premises were thoroughly trashed. The CWAO stated: "We lost our furniture, printing and communications equipment, our case files … this is a heavy loss in already difficult circumstances."*
>
> *CWAO works mainly with labour broker workers who are among the most exploited and marginalised sections of the working*

class.

Workers International to Rebuild the Fourth International condemns the xenophobia which divides the exploited and the oppressed and exculpates the imperialists and their servants in the South African state who exploit the masses and violently bar the way to social progress.

Please support the CWAO's appeal to restore their premises and facilities and continue to organise and defend casual workers. You can donate to their fund here: https://www.gofundme.com/f/solidarity-with-casual-workers-advice-office-sa

Hewat Beukes expressed the views of WIRFI on these matters in this posting:

UNRESOLVED CONTRADICTIONS COME TO BITE AGAIN

In 1971/72 Namibian contract workers went on a general strike in the mines, agriculture, and in the colonial industrial and commercial sectors. It was an indelible demonstration of workers' power. It inspired and set off the South African veld fire of strikes which culminated in the struggle for union rights and the student struggles of 1976. By 1978 Namibia had a fully-fledged union movement in tandem with South Africa. The bourgeois nationalists in both South Africa and Namibia, the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Stalinists did not like it. Lacking a workers' party, the workers' movement was relatively easy prey to slander and liquidation both here and in exile.

The 'Marxist left' which ought to have given clarity failed to see the attacks against the working class as the deployment of a toxic lumpen proletariat by a tribal petit-bourgeoisie to subjugate the class and its struggles to the alliance of the bourgeoisie and pre-capitalist tribal structures. They even went on to mistakenly characterise the kangaroo courts,

necklacing of workers, etc. as “self-rule” and “dictatorship of the working class”. The most insidious, reactionary, and horrific reaction against the rising working class could not come from the race regime. It came from the tribal agents of the bourgeoisie within oppressed communities.

This lumpen vice-like grip on working class communities is now being used to revive the caretaker regime’s grip on the working class. It is not directed against organised crime: drug dealing, etcetera. It is directed against mostly vulnerable impoverished refugees, as a smokescreen for lumpen elements to loot and advance petty crime. The political objective is far more sinister, which is to deliver the working class bound hand and foot to the capitalist exploiter and international capital.

It is the obligation of the workers’ movement to correctly define and characterise the present instigated attacks against the working class under the smokescreen of xenophobia. Its central objective is to disable working class organisation and subjugate working-class communities. It is the same monstrous legacy of the 1970s and 1980s. It is meant to lift the caretaker petit bourgeoisie out of its crisis.

This politics is encompassed by the ongoing denial that the determining factor in the independence of Namibia, the universal right to vote in South Africa (nothing more) and the independence of Zimbabwe were the mass uprisings of the working classes in Southern Africa since 1971. The scale of disruption of Apartheid tyranny in Southern Africa by the South African working class as the decisive factor of change (albeit in caretaker states) is denied and absurdly assigned to individuals to boot.

There can be no revolution in Southern Africa if these historical analyses are not concretised in the organisational structures of the working class. The agencies of the bourgeoisie shall be identified analytically. We shall know

and recognise the operations of reaction as against the operations of working-class struggle for political power.

Hewat Beukes

7 September 2019

Out Now! Latest issue of Die Werker, June 2019

latest issue of Die Werker

In this issue:

The discrimination against the San continues unabated.

Organisation and program in place of hopelessness – Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party launched in South Africa

Message from the WRP to the SRWP.

Birth of the United Seafarer’s Association.

The Committee of Parents petition the United Nations High Commission for Refugees for accounting on the atrocities committed against Namibian refugees.

Where have all the trains gone?

TSUMEB: The Endobo Hostel fraud.

Workers Advice Centre pledges to join SAFTU in the giant federation’s fight against the organised criminality of the First National Bank.

TCL miners resume their struggle for their stolen pensions.

Algeria: Release all the political prisoners immediately!

Workers international has endorsed this demand and urges it's widespread support

Algeria: Release all the political prisoners immediately!

(Hadj Ghermoul,Hadj Brahim Aouf, Louisa Hanoune and many others)

Since 22 February, millions of Algerians have been demonstrating to demand democracy and sovereignty – a chanting "Regime, Out Now!"

The Algerian regime has responded by unleashing repression against political activists, lawyers, young people and trade unionists.

In particular, the regime has targeted the following (listed in the order that they were arrested):

- **Hadj Ghermoul**, a young activist of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights and a member of the National Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Unemployed, who in February was sentenced to six months in prison without parole for holding a sign that read, "No to a Fifth Term!" (for former President Bouteflika).
- **Kameleddine Fekhar**, a human rights activist campaigning

in defence of the democratic rights of the Mozabite population of the Algerian province of Ghardaïa and a member of the FFS (Socialist Forces Front),was arrested in Ghardaïa in March. **On 28 May, Dr Kameleddine Fekhar died in prison after a 56-day hunger strike. Despite his deteriorating health and the many protests demanding his release, the authorities allowed the situation to worsen.**

- **Hadj Brahim Aouf,**a teacher from Ghardaïa who was arrested along with Dr Fekhar, who is also on a hunger strike and whose life is in danger.
- **Louisa Hanoune**, General Secretary of the Workers Party (PT), who was arrested on 9 May and charged with "conspiracy against the State authority and the military authority."

Many other activists also have been arrested and imprisoned.

We, the undersigned, express our solidarity with the Algerian people and call for the immediate release of all political prisoners!

Endorsement Coupon

NAME

POSITION (for ID purposes only)

UNION/ORGANISATION

New issue of Die Werker

In this issue:

TransNamib’s shenanigans.
Is there hope for the poor?
Health Minister dismissed.
South Africa – A crucial debate ensues.
International Inquiry into the mass murders of SWAPO resumes.

The challenge that SRWP launch poses to sectarian propagandists:

Show Us What You’ve Got!

Bob Archer replies on behalf of WIRFI to *The Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party: A major distraction*, by John Appolis.
(available in pamphlet form)

The forthcoming Launch Congress of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party in South Africa throws down a significant challenge to intellectual Marxists.

Here is an embryo party which assembled over 1,000 activists in a pre-launch congress in December 2018, proclaims that its aim is to lead the fight of the working class against the bourgeoisie and their political allies, and proudly inscribes on its banner adherence to the revolutionary thought of Marx

and Lenin.

To show they mean what they say, the forces in the leadership of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), which initiated this work, have spent 5 years systematically preparing the ground to launch this party.

It was the state-sponsored murder of striking miners at Marikana in July 2012 which dramatically laid bare the reality of society and politics in post-apartheid South Africa. Up to that point the alliance of South African Communist Party (SACP), African National Congress (ANC) and Confederation of South African Trades Unions (Cosatu) had justified and dominated a liberation (in the early 1990s) which has worked less and less for the benefit of the South African masses and more and more in the interests of a small group of black bourgeois and global capital.

At the end of apartheid in 1990-94, the leadership of Numsa lined the union membership up with SACP policy and the new Alliance regime. They blurred over a significant issue for the union members: many Numsa members supported a Workers' Charter for socialism rather than the ANC Freedom Charter. The Freedom Charter, carrying on the line of the Stalinist rulers in the Soviet Union and the various Communist Parties around the world, dictated that liberation must be under the control of the black bourgeoisie and tribal leaders, and that capitalist property relations must remain intact. Militant socialist workers in Numsa were at this point persuaded by their leadership and figures in the ANC that the Freedom Charter could be adjusted to accommodate workers' demands, and that idea carried the day.

However, the Alliance government continued on a capitalist road which left no room for what workers needed and wanted. Adherence to bourgeois politics in the 1990s inevitably led to continuing the neo-liberal reforms which had already been started under the Nationalist regime. The consequences of

these policies brought growing resistance from union members and the masses.

For a long time, leaders of Numsa and some other unions tried to shift government policies from within the Alliance. Under pressure from their members, they fought to align Cosatu on policies that defended workers' rights and conditions. This set them on a course which eventually led to an inevitable collision with the SACP and ANC and within Cosatu itself.

The mineworkers' revolt at Marikana, the state's massacre of the strikers and the ensuing wave of militant struggle were the signal that the collision had matured to a point of qualitative change. The leadership of Numsa grasped what others could not articulate, that a new stage had been reached in class relations in South Africa which demanded a political step forward involving the whole working class. This led to the union's Special Congress of December 2013 and the adoption of a plan to work for a new political party.

Faced with bureaucratic chicanery in Cosatu, Numsa's leadership stood their ground and fought back, sought allies, and tested every possible way to oppose being expelled. Contrast this with the "up and out" tactics common in petty-bourgeois academic political circles.

The result was that, when they could no longer retain their membership of Cosatu, they were able to take a number of other trade unions with them. That led to the formation of a new and independent union federation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu).

Dynamics of class struggle

Quite a few commentators on the left are unable to grasp the class dynamics involved here. How they misconceive the relationship between the Alliance government (whose current President appears to have green-lighted the police attack at Marikana – he certainly publicly excused it), the massacre

itself, and the workers' movement and its leaders is quite instructive.

"The Re-Awakening of a People" is a Situation Paper put out by the Eastern Cape branches of the New Unity Movement in October 2017. The authors put the split in Cosatu and the establishment of Saftu on the same level as previous splits in the ANC which led to the formation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and The Congress of the People (Cope):

"ANC splits have spawned Cope and the EFF; COSATU splits have spawned NUMSA and SAFTU. This has resulted in a weakened Labour Movement, not supportive of worker and community interest, but seeking political footholds to gain parliamentary privileges and patronage."

But the facts speak against this view. Although it claims adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Communism, everything about the EFF shrieks aloud that it is a second-hand version of the ANC, demagogically denouncing its parent organisation on behalf of a disaffected claimant to a cut of the spoils, Julius Malema.

Cope was formed by supporters of President Thabo Mbeki after his nakedly pro-bourgeois policies, and his obscurantist backwardness over dealing with the aids epidemic allowed Jacob Zuma to force him out of office and replace him. Cope was led by Mosiuoa Lekota, who informed *The Sunday Times* that the ideology of his party would be one that embraces multiracial and multicultural participation in governance and promoting the free market. He denied any connection to Marxism and indicated that Cope was willing to ally itself with the (bourgeois) Democratic Alliance.

The comparison the New Unity Movement makes is purely abstract: a split = a split; all splits are the same; in their twilight, all splits are grey. The working class is left completely out of the picture in this comparison, along with

any examination of the actual content of the split!

What the move by Numsa actually represents is a development in the long-drawn-out death agony of Stalinist politics and political formations and a step forward in the development of the working class.

However, the New Unity Movement cannot deal with this because they themselves have never systematically broken from the SACP's subservience to the black petty bourgeoisie and tribal leaders.

Abstract and concrete unity

This Situation Paper even says somewhat later:

"What is especially troubling about the confusing NUMSA situation was that it could not have happened at a more difficult time for the working class. In 2012, workers had been butchered on a notable occasion the Wonderkop koppie near Marikana … At that moment,union organisation stood at a premium. It was imperative that all the union federations should stand together like one man and organise a worker fight back of historic proportions. This was not to be. Neither COSATU nor NUMSA were equal to the task."

What chance in Hell was there that a Labour Movement led by that actual Cosatu would "stand together like one man and organise a worker fight back of historic proportions"? It was precisely for demanding a "fight back" of any proportions at all that Numsa came under the hammer in Cosatu.

One is inevitably reminded of the situation in 1914, when one after another the socialist parties of Europe voted to support their "own" governments' war efforts and workers in different uniforms and different flags were led into slaughtering each other. At that point, a line was drawn between these socialists in name only and the real socialists who went on to split away and found the Communist International. **Which side**

does the New Unity Movement support, looking back?

May it be remembered that officials of a major Cosatu union – the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – were swapping bullets and blows with the Marikana strike organisers. The former NUM Secretary, Cyril Ramaphosa, was in cahoots with the mining company and the police who carried out the massacre. You have to doubt the political acumen of anyone who can stand aside under those circumstances wringing their hands over "unity". That ship had sailed!

Establishing working class unity requires concrete steps, action, and sometimes splits with the ones who are trying to hold the movement back. Abstract calls for "unity" only help those leaders and tendencies who betray workers and leave them victim to employer/state violence as at Marikana.

The fact is that no significant working-class leadership or organisation at the time was "equal" to the challenge laid down by the Marikana strikers and the mass upsurge of militancy which followed the massacre. One group of workers after another went into action over a period of weeks. All the unions were riding a storm, which of course eventually subsided.

Many political activists, independently or in small left groups, acted bravely and selflessly too, but the effective organised response to Marikana came precisely via Numsa, who fought through a necessary break with the ANC, the SACP and the Cosatu leadership.

Some who were initially enthusiastic about the "Numsa Moment" (the Special Congress in December 2013 and the decisions taken there) have lost hope in the five years that followed. They wanted immediate positive results. When these remained elusive, they started to look elsewhere for a quick fix.

The thing about planned and systematic work is that the struggle takes spontaneous forms: the developments which might

be expected often come in an unexpected shape. But without a plan and a strategy around which a cohesive group of activists can work and learn together, there can be no adequate flexibility in dealing with sudden changes and breaks.

Middle-class radicals can change their political affiliations “at the drop of a hat”, as often as they change their shirt. Serious organisations of workers cannot afford such luxuries. They size up the job soberly, calculate the time and materials needed, roll up their sleeves and get to work. Only in this way can they prepare themselves and their organisations flourish and grow in unexpected turns in the situation

So, step by step the Numsa leadership worked through the split in Cosatu, assisted the coming together of Saftu, saw the establishment of the United Front social movement and now anticipates the launch of the new party next March.

Last year a general strike which Numsa organised brought thousands out onto the street in a display of working-class strength.

Nothing about this looks like **playing** at politics or engaging in empty rhetoric.

Every Marxist intellectual worth her or his salt should be queuing up to assist this party by ensuring that its leaders and members have every opportunity genuinely to get to grips with the actual thought of Karl Marx and other great revolutionary leaders, study it and critically make it their own.

Together with a serious study of the history of the workers’ revolutionary movement and grappling with the current state of the imperialist world we live in, such work will steel the new party’s ranks and arm it theoretically, politically and in terms of its human assets to guide and lead the working class and the masses.

“No regard to history, context and working-class experience”?

But there are still groups who are sceptical of this development. One South African long-term activist writes:

“It is my contention that the formation of the SWRP is a distraction and not the appropriate call in the present conjuncture. Also the SRWP is being formed with no regard to history, context and working class experience”: (in *The Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP): A major distraction*by John Appolis.)

He decries the lack of a “position paper that outlines the perspectives of the SRWP”. He points out that the new party’s manifesto and constitution lack any “outline of the nature of the present period, the balance of forces, the state of the working class and its formations”. He believes that the statements in the Manifesto about capitalism, socialism, the working class” etc. are “generalities, that could have been written at any stage of the development of the working-class movement”.

We will return later to Appolis’ attitude to working-class political parties in general. The point here is: does Appolis himself grasp the character of the period?

Let us here just mention briefly a few aspects of the current situation (the “conjuncture” or “context”):

• we live in the consequences of the decay and collapse of the Soviet Union, which is (wrongly) felt and understood by millions of working-class people to demonstrate the collapse of all hope of socialist proletarian revolution. All working-class organisations – political parties and trade unions – have suffered from crisis and decay, and this has led to widespread disillusionment with these organisational forms;

• therefore, there is enormous confusion among all the masses all over the world; basic conceptions of class struggle which

our forefathers would have taken for granted have withered;

• all that nevertheless intersects with a further catastrophic deepening of the crisis of imperialism which brings down poverty, misery, oppression and the threat of war upon the masses, including workers, together with a frustration of democratic aspirations, forcing them to organise resistance despite and amid the confusion;

• Signs of a political recovery start to emerge among the confusion wherever class issues start to predominate. For example, in the “yellow vest” movement in France, very broad swathes of the masses react angrily to the shift of tax burden away from big-business and the super-rich onto the shoulders of workers and other “petit peuple” – “small folk”. (They also have a keen class appreciation of President Macron’s arrogant posturing). This is a small but significant step further than the “Occupy”, “Indignados”, “Squares” protests of the last ten years. Similarly, in Hungary, an authoritarian “populist” government tried to give employers the right to exact overtime from workers to an even greater degree than they already can, fanning the flames of a genuinely “popular” revolt over a class issue:

• The working class has held on to its trade unions (in some places and by the skin of their teeth). Those trade unions which have resisted class-collaboration (social partnership) and retained their class-consciousness are now a vital source of strength in the regeneration of working- class politics. Numsa is one example, but Unite the Union in the UK, together with the civil and public servants in PCS, are another. And in the US, many teacher unions are spearheading class struggles in defence of education in their “social movement” campaigns.

• The negative aspects of all the above are all too real and tangible, but the class struggle continues, and leaders emerge in the working class who are fighting to change circumstances.

The conditions described above are something to be reckoned with, but Appolis accepts them as something fixed and above all intractable. Indeed. He misses the real significance of the events at Marikana: out of all the confusion, **the class struggle emerged as the key issue.**Whoever else spotted the importance of the event, it was the Numsa leadership which was able to do something constructive to take the struggle forward.

Appolis sees Marikana as a "difficult time" for the working class, a "notable occasion". What Marikana means more profoundly is that the fulfilment of the liberation of South Africa (and elsewhere) must be led by the working class under a genuinely revolutionary programme. For Marxists, that is the significance of the launch of the SRWP.

The December 2013 Numsa Special Congress clearly sided with the working class in class struggle against the bourgeoisie and recognised that the working class needed a special organisation – a party – to wage that struggle successfully.

A distraction?

John Appolis sees this as a distraction. He says: "The establishment of SRWP takes militants, especially NUMSA militants, away from building existing fighting battalions of the working class and poor".

But trade unions are big organisations with (relatively) mass memberships. A properly-conducted trade union is always seeking to extend and develop its circle of active members beyond a core of officials and shop stewards. A great range of issues can engage trade union members, once they realise the union offers a field of activity and an outlet for their hopes. Moving into the political field will have its difficulties. Political party practises are different from trade union practices in various ways; there will be a learning curve. But the launch of SRWP will ultimately

strengthen the trade union movement and bolster the consciousness and confidence of its members.

What political parties can do

John Appolis goes on: "… what will the SRWP do which other organisations / movements of the working class cannot do?"

Well, at the very most basic level, if it grows properly, the SRWP can and must enter parliament and other elected bodies, push aside the corrupt ANC politicians, the DA etc. and fight to enact policies in the interests of the working people in economy, justice, housing, health, education, power supply, utilities, public ownership and workers' rights for a start. Single-issue or localised campaigns cannot do this; Trade unions as such cannot do this, but Numsa has decided, as a trade union, to launch a party to unite all the struggles of the South African working class at a political level.

And when it becomes clear that the bourgeoisie will resort to every violent, underhand and anti-democratic trick to maintain its system and its rule, then the Party will have trained a body of vigilant worker-activists who will know how to foil their attacks and what to do next. Unlike the anarchists, we do not think the question of workers' power can be settled without a workers' party.

Appolis accuses the Numsa leadership of adhering to an "obsolete schema": "workers' parties are for the fight for socialism while mass formations like trade unions are for defensive struggles". John Appolis refers to Trotsky saying in the 1930s that "in the period of imperialist decay, to fulfil their ameliorative tasks mass organisations that were established for reforms have to take a revolutionary approach to their tasks."

But does anybody believe Trotsky was saying that specifically revolutionary parties were no longer needed? He was explaining (80 years ago!) that trade union organisations (like Numsa!),

despite the appearance of being “only defensive” were going to have to play a role in building political parties, and in their own properly trade union activities be a school of revolutionary struggle. Numsa turns to set up SRWP. Militants trade unionists in Unite the Union in Britain blow on the apparently dead embers of radical socialism in the British Labour party – and what once looked nearly moribund has come back to life!

In both cases, it becomes evident that there is more to being in a political party than there is to being in a trade union. For Numsa, the wall (between a trade union and a party) is something to be crossed. And they are learning how to cross it.

The dynamics of this period mean that less than ever can the rebirth of the workers’ socialist movement happen in obedience to purely academic positions. Class relations are utterly explosive. Marikana and the spontaneous wave of struggle that followed are surely a case in point. This struggle did not start with an academic person sitting at a desk and studying the situation. That’s not to say that knowledge and study are unimportant – far from it. Knowledge of the history of the movement, the history of socialist ideas and the Marxist method are decisive. Indeed, the founders of the SRWP went out of their way to request assistance in all these matters.

And they are not wrong to do so. It is clear from statements the “party leadership” have made that they have by no means broken with, or even fully grasped, the Stalinist roots of the disastrous politics of the SACP and the Alliance. It is perfectly true that the SRWP, both leaders and activists, have taken on a daunting theoretical and political job as they seek to revive “socialism, as espoused by Karl Marx” as a living force in the working class and masses. **But the fact that the work is underway provides the only hope that it might be successful. Those who claim any mastery of theoretical Marxism should put their shoulders to the wheel and help them**.

The Numsa leaders started their explanations by contrasting what the ANC government has actually done and how it has acted with the promises made before (cf. Irvin Jim's Ruth First Memorial lecture in 2014). They still bought into the whole Stalinist programme, which dictated that South Africa must first have a "bourgeois" revolution so that the country could develop as a modern capitalist state, and that only after a period of organic evolution would the conditions ripen for a proletarian revolution. Where else could they start? **But start they did**, and this opened up a process in which they invited all and sundry to come and make their contribution. **Why hold back?**

Abstractly "theoretical" comrades are left floundering, because it is trade unionists who, in relation to fundamental class-consciousness, for the moment are to the fore in the regeneration of the political movement. Bookish comrades fret over the lack of "any outline of the nature of the present period, the balance of forces, the state of the working class and its formations" (Appolis). They believe the development of the political movement must wait for them to carry out all the necessary study and resolved the debatable questions. But it will not wait. It is needed now! "History, context and working-class experience" imperiously demand it!

Who is the propagandist?

Appolis accuses those launching the SRWP of "propagandism", which he describes as: "a type of politics where a group believes that through calls, it can make the rest of the working class leap from where it is politically to the groups 'profound and more advanced' understanding … although conditions for the SRWP are non-existent, it is believed that forming the party now would allow the masses to jump from where they are in terms of consciousness to where the party leadership is".

This mixes up the relationship between the masses and the

“party leadership” in this specific situation. The masses have for a long time been putting pressure on “their” leadership in the unions and the alliance government. The working-class revolt in 2012 burst the abscess that the Alliance was. People were forced to take sides. But not everybody involved was able to take a political initiative, map a road forward. The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) certainly was not at the time able to do so.

Appolis’ definition of “propagandism” is in any case a little off-target. He emphasises one aspect of propagandism – belief in the power of the word to solve all problems of the movement. But it is more generally recognised in our traditions that very useful political speakers and writers often fall into two categories.

Propagandists make detailed explanations of general issues. Organisations like the New Unity Movement (c.f. The Re-Awakening of a People” – October 2017) ask a question like “What are the watchwords of our political movement during this period”, and the average reading might well expect just that – a set of pithy watchwords. But no! This is simply the opening for a disquisition upon the inhumanity of capitalism and the social consequences in terms of growing crime and depravity based on a series of examples draw from media reports. “What barbarism!”, the authors complain (“What barbarism!” and “Kangakanani?” seem to be the only concrete “watchwords” at the end of the article). But: “We are comforted by the superior social values contained in the socialist system. Here the antitheses to the vulgarities and decay of old social systems have given way to a world in which science, knowledge and kindness take precedents (sic) in all the affairs of human kind”.

This is pure (and frankly rather mawkish) propagandism, but there are situations where detailed explanations of theoretical points are useful.

“A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people,” as the Russian Marxist, Plekhanov, explained.

Surely a revolutionary movement needs people with both talents! However, a third talent, the ability to organise, is a key element which can have a mighty impact within the working class. The very systematic way in which the foundation of SRWP has been approached means Appolis’ accusation is misplaced. Yes, the party has been formed before its theoretical underpinning have been determined beyond a few generalities, but its foundation has been very carefully organised by a workers’ organisation. It will have an impact on mass consciousness. It has already had a very considerable impact through last year’s general strike.

Parties and class consciousness

“… it is believed that forming the party now would allow the masses to jump from where they are in terms of consciousness to where the party leadership is,” writes John Appolis.

What does he say about “where they are now in terms of consciousness”? Well, he believes that “conditions for the SRWP are non-existent” and for good measure, he accuses the proposal to found the party as having “something elitist” about it. Why? Because, for one thing, “We have not yet arrived at the point where the question of power is on the agenda”. For John Appolis, building a working-class party will have to wait until, after “much effort and struggle”, “the proletariat has begun to replace the ruling class plans with its own”.

This formal understanding of working-class consciousness imposes a rigid strait-jacket upon the way it develops. The great mass of people, which includes the working class, always have “plans of their own”. They may involve the very smallest

acts of individual resistance, groups getting together for the purposes of "building and strengthening the defensive organisations" – not only of the working class at the moment, but also of the broader masses left high and dry by the crisis of imperialism, and like the "yellow vests" now in France or some years ago the Poll Tax rioters in the UK. Here in the UK we have groups opposing cuts to welfare, housing and disability benefits, groups opposing the government-led attacks on the National Health Service and on state education.

The huge obstacle to achieving their goals is that government is everywhere in the hands of political parties convinced that the domination of the bourgeois class is inevitable. Many previously socialist or communist forces have abandoned any hope of a socialist future and at best propose palliative measures to soften the blows which fall upon workers. They justify this by explaining in various ways that the class struggle is over and other issues are more important.

The Marikana miners' struggle, taken forward by the Numsa Special Congress decisions, gives the lie to all that and kicks open the gate to nationwide (and beyond!) united class action. Propaganda as just words does not build class movements, but when the words take on an organisational form, they become mighty indeed.

Conception of workers' power

Stalinism corrupted the politics of the Communist International (CI) as it undermined soviet democracy in the Soviet Union. It was the political outlook of a relatively small caste of bureaucrats who ended up in charge of the fledgling workers' state. The conditions and ways in which this happened are matters which will need to be discussed in the process of defining the SRWP's political stance.

The point to grasp here is that Stalinism was a caricature of

Lenin's revolutionary Marxism, the policy and practices of the Bolsheviks.

But the thrust of bourgeois propaganda (eagerly peddled also by many erstwhile "Marxists") is that Lenin and Leninism are to blame for the degeneration and decay of the Soviet Union etc. John Appolis is one of those who says this. He notes (not quite accurately) that Lenin's view of a workers' party was "… not only for political representation but also as an instrument for co-ordination of workers' struggles. He also saw the vanguard party as vital for two other reasons. *Firstly*, Lenin saw a vanguard party as important for synthesising of workers' experiences – i.e. theorisation of struggles. *Secondly*, he saw it as a repository of the class' historical memory".

He continues: "It is common cause that despite the existence of mass communist parties, many of revolutions of the 20th degenerated". In his view, the cause of this degeneration was that it was easy for "revolutions to degenerate when all three historical tasks … (co-ordination of struggle, theorization and ensuring historical memory and continuity) were concentrated in one working class organ".

But there is no evidence that Lenin thought "one working class organ" could adequately embody the political life of the working class. Naturally, following Engels, he emphasised the significance for the revolutionary party of the theoretical struggle. This was far beyond "synthesising of workers' struggles". Lenin knew how essential it is to combat the ideological influence of the bourgeoisie, who control the main educational facilities and mass media, and understood that overcoming the influence of the bourgeoise involved critically mastering the achievements of bourgeois science and intellectual life. Lenin is painted by his enemies and false friends as a dogmatist, but that is far from the truth.

He did understand, however, that the revolutionary party is

irreplaceable. And he understood that possession of their own party helped workers to raise their political horizon, intervene in the legislative process, get measures adopted which ameliorated their situation, freed the hands of their other fighting bodies (trades unions, tenants' organisations and other campaigns) to organise effectively.

John Appolis needs to stop equivocating and state: does he agree with the preceding paragraph, or has he abandoned Lenin's views on the party completely? There is a good argument to be had about Leninist parties, because his (Lenin's) views on the matter were systematically falsified in the later Communist International, in particular in one-sided interpretations of the book "What Is To Be Done?". This book is presented as if it proposes a hierarchical, top-down and bureaucratic party structure. All this will have to be clarified in discussion. What is not acceptable at all is the view that the working class can exercise its historical interests without its own, revolutionary, party.

Only in revolutionary situations?

"We have not yet arrived at the point where question of power is on the agenda", says John Appolis, under the heading "(4) Conditions are not yet ripe for the SRWP".

Since the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008, we have seen endless spontaneous protest movements of resistance in many parts of the world, particularly USA, Europe and the Middle East/North Africa. "Occupy". The "Indignados", the occupation of the Squares in Greece, were all responses to the impact of the crisis on working people, but they were all marked by an extremely low level of class consciousness and political clarity. The Arab Spring brought examples of breath-taking courage as the masses challenged authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, the Gulf states and most recently Syria. However, the best political demand they could come up with was a general thirst for "democracy" and rage at

oppression and corruption.

Almost everywhere, these movements have either subsided or (in the Middle East) mainly been smashed up. News from the Sudan indicates that a second round is very likely underway.

Why is the "question of power not on the agenda"? Because none of these movements has yet been equipped with an adequate consciousness of the social and economic motive forces of the crisis which has engulfed them. All have been suspicious of parties and trade unions which came to them with explanations, and indeed prejudiced (because of negative experiences) against Marxist politics. What becomes clear is that (however explicable) this suspicion and prejudice is obstructing the forging of forms of consciousness and organisation which might equip the movement to struggle successfully.

The objective situation of imperialism is truly not just "ripe" for revolution, but "over-ripe". The subjective factor – the political consciousness and level of organisation of the masses, working class leadership – lags far, far behind.

The WRP (Namibia) and the trades union movement

In 1974 working class members of the SWANU Youth, SWAPO Youth League and the VolksParty Youth met in Rehoboth in a clandestine meeting convened by Hewat Beukes. They formed the Socialist Youth movement, recognizing that the tribal and bourgeois nationalist leaderships in Namibia were politically bankrupt and could only lead the country to a new capitalist state under more or less the same colonial and imperialist ruling classes.

This meeting was the almost natural outcome of the working class struggles which exploded in 1971/72 with the General Strike of contract labour nationally in various industries, agriculture and commercial businesses. The reciprocated infusion of the struggle for trade unionism in the massive struggles of the working class in South Africa since 1973

caused not only a pulsation in Namibia but accentuated the political division between the objectives of the workers' struggles on the one hand and the tribalist bourgeois nationalism of the petit bourgeoisie and the tribal royalties and chiefs on the other.

The socialist group was founded to advance a socialist programme in support of the struggles of the working class and to counteract the bourgeois programme (lack of programme) of the nationalists. They recognized that the country would become independent under a bourgeois nationalist leadership, given the imperialist and Stalinist edifice behind them and the massive disadvantages facing the socialists. They resolved therefore to work tirelessly to prepare the working class for a speedy response to the inevitable merger of the imperialists and the tribalist bourgeois nationalists.

The socialist youth defended the working-class leaders in the great miners' strikes and struggles after 1978 against the tribal onslaughts of in particular the SWAPO, but they were unable to prevent that leadership succumbing under slander, attacks, using their international connections and co-option of union leaderships. The socialists were now thrust into a new direction of struggle. By 1984. The SWAPO had totally dismantled and neutralized the union leadership, whose top leader it had coaxed into exile, forced to write a constitution for the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), and then jailed. It replaced the leadership with SWAPO nationalists who drove the union movement into a reckless direction of impromptu wildcat strikes on such demands as the implementation of Resolution 435, which had as its cornerstone the protection of bourgeois private property. Hundreds and thousands of workers lost their jobs.

In 1984, the socialists clandestinely founded the Workers Revolutionary Party: they supported the Namibia Trade Union, a socialist union, wrote its newspaper, and counteracted the *agent provocateur* methods of the NUNW. It fought the

tribalization of the workers' movement by the SWAPO and the NUNW.

In 1988 the WRP was able successfully to call out national protests against the illegal occupation of Namibia. The SWAPO leadership and the SWANU leader (who is now a SWAPO member) declined the invitation to make the call.

The foundation and work of the WRP were closely connected to the struggle for union rights and working-class organization.

Now Numsa, too, has boldly raised the banner of Marxism. The South African working class has reminded the world that this is everywhere the class which can guarantee a future for humanity.

Would-be intellectual Marxist can use their talents to the best effect by striving to make good any defects they perceive in the new venture. The problems of the SRWP are not that it is unnecessary; far from it! It is profoundly necessary! The problems with the fledgling party arise from the dismal effects of the political degeneration of Stalinism. But the foundation of the new party offers the best guarantee that these problems can be overcome.

Bob Archer,
on behalf of Workers International to Rebuild the Fourth International,
January 2019

France: The "hi-viz" movement

> *A translation of a report from A.V. in Marseille. Published on lernenimkamp website in 23 November 2018*

The “hi-viz” movement started with motorists protesting against the increase in fuel prices following an increase in the tax on diesel fuel.

For years diesel fuel prices in France have been low, and this led many people to buy diesel vehicles. Now the taxes on diesel fuel are going up. Calls for road blocks started on Facebook and other social networks. These began on Saturday 17 November. According to government sources, 280,000 people gathered together at 2,000 different locations on that day, blocking roads, demonstrating and occupying motorways. The road blocks have persisted since then.

Although parties like La France Insoumise or the far-right Rassemblement Nationale support this movement in the media, they do not officially contribute to it. What you hear on the roadblocks is above all peoples’ fury at Macron and his government. For years, and in particular since Macron came to power, living conditions for the majority of French people have been getting worse. He has cut taxes affecting the rich (what the French call “ISF”), raised the tax burden on pensioners and civil servants (“CSG”), cut housing benefit and at the same time introduced an annual cut of 40 bn euro on business (“CICE”). Inflation is rising more strongly and wages are stagnating, so real wages are falling. And now motorists, particularly in medium-sized towns, have to pay more for fuel, although they have no alternative way of getting around at a time when we are all told labour has to more mobile. The overwhelming majority of people know that they are not paying this tax to protect the environment, and that in the framework of the reform of the state railways more and more routes are being closed. The entire French tax system is unfair. In comparison with what they earn, French workers pay a lot more than the rich, the shareholders, the bourgeoisie. A few weeks ago Macron told an unemployed person he only needed to cross the road to find a job. Today thousands of French people are not just crossing the road, they are blocking it shouting

“Macron demission!” – “Macron resign!” With his pro-rich policies and his arrogance (he recently told a pensioner to quit complaining), Macron has lined up over 70% of French people – basically the whole working class – against him. To add fuel to the flames, the security service, who mostly had no idea on 17 November where the road-blocks and demonstrations were going to happen, have reacted very hesitantly. But since last Monday things have changed. Since Saturday thousands of workers, tradespeople and -noticeably – lots of women have been blocking France’s roads. The movement is strongest in the medium-sized towns. However, on 17 November there were also actions in Paris, where over 1,000 demonstrators nearly got through to their stated target in front of the Elysee Palace (Macron’s Official residence). Now the government is trying to criminalise the movement, portraying the demonstrators as wreckers. Even if the movement has ebbed a little, it remains popular. And it has a new goal: the 24 November demo in Paris.

The demonstrators want Macron to resign and they know that power lies in the Elysee Palace.

Apart from the road transport industry sector of the (moderate socialist) Force Ouvriere union, who yesterday called for support for the movement, the “hi-viz” movement has not yet been supported by the big union confederations. The (traditionally Communist-led) CGT confederation calls for support for a demonstration they have already planned for 1 December. It is left to the bourgeois press to speculate about the movement’s far-right potential. A lot of people are wondering why the trade unions are hesitating about joining the movement. The same is true of France Insoumise, which has not so far got involved in the struggle as an organisation. The well-known France Insoumise parliamentary deputy, Francois Ruffin, stated on the evening of 21 November on TV that France Insoumise is not calling for Macron’s resignation, but that if he continued to defend only the interests of big business he

would have to go. This lack of determination and political clarity help the government. Francois Ruffin demands a reduction in the fuel tax, more tax justice and the reintroduction of the wealth tax. That is right. These are also demands which the unions could bring into the movement.

Basically, the question of power is raised. So far neither France Insoumise nor the union leaders have contributed to bringing the government down. On 24 November the “hi-viz” are planning to head for Paris in numbers to force the government to listen to them. We can assume that these workers and intermediate layers who are not organised in unions will try to head for the Elysee Palace. They are right to do so. Today trade unions can establish a clear platform of demands and offer support in organising this demonstration.