

Understanding the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China: reflections on a posting

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A fellow member of my trade union asked my opinion of an online article by a British socialist, John Ross: The historical significance of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China – Learning from China .

This union colleague and I have worked together over quite a few years as part of a grouping in a teachers' union here in England which aims to build the union at its base and in its leadership. This group has had considerable success and our union is now well-placed and playing a significant role in the re-awakening of organised resistance by the UK working class to the effects of the economic crisis This work is earning significant support from wide sections of the community. We are also known throughout our union for the emphasis we lay on international solidarity issues.

Several of the better-led trade unions here are organising resistance to attacks on wages, living standards, access to public service and welfare entitlements on the part of finance capital, employers and the current UK government. In the process we are standing up for the interests of the broader community. This is not an isolated trend. There are similar struggles across North America, the Caribbean and in southern Africa, for example.

It is worth stressing this because the topic under discussion – the current state of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) and its role in world economy and politics – is not a matter of abstract interest or of concern just for political nerds.

The posting by John Ross under discussion here is a very explicit attempt to establish a dominant position for the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and its policies in the workers' and progressive movement across the world. The role of the PRC and CPC is undoubtedly having an impact among workers, activists and trade unionists here and elsewhere who are striving to renew their own outlook, political consciousness and understanding of their place in the world. Instead of forming fighting solidarity with workers' movements around the world, we see the Chinese government forming cosy relationships with regimes which practice exploitation, bow down to trans-national corporations and very often deny basic rights to their own citizens.

We have to do our best to arrive at a sober and objective grasp of these matters but we are hampered by the prevalence on all sides of biased propaganda, misinformation and downright lies blaring out on huge variety of available media.

An offer accepted

Since the article in question is comparatively short and available online, there is no point picking out lengthy quotations from it in this response. The article starts by listing the considerable economic achievements of the PRC since the adoption of the policy of "Reform and Opening Up", following contacts between US and Chinese leaders in the 1970s. Statistics and graphs are presented to back the assertion that the development of the PRC in the period since then has done more to eliminate poverty than any previous process of industrial development (the British industrial revolution, the US after 1865, the Pacific Tigers after World War II ...).

There can be no denying this! However, the article also claims that it was made possible by a development of Marxism-Leninism on the part of the CPC leadership. Many will find the references to Marxism-Leninism a bit outlandish. One of the advantages of Marxism, in my view, is that it encourages us to look behind headline statistics to find the social relations

and tendencies underlying them. For John Ross, in contrast, it is a matter of uncritically extrapolating a rising graph: China was a low-income country; it has become a middle-income country; it will therefore in time inevitably become a high-income country. He ascribes this success to the persistent wisdom of the CPC leadership. Any real statistician ("Marxist-Leninist" or not) would think twice about such an approach.

Indeed, the trajectory he traces started at a specific point of economic globalisation in the 1970s. There was a specific relationship of forces at the time, which deserves some attention. US capitalism had emerged as the main power in world economy after 1945, and had assumed the leadership of capitalism around the world. This was a mixed blessing for the US! Besides successful revolutions in China and Yugoslavia, the USSR had by the end of the war made huge territorial gains in Eastern Europe. Colonies like India and Indonesia were achieving independence, while other colonies and semi-colonies across the world were also involved in independence struggles. To try to staunch any further progress of this sort, and to adjust to new circumstances, the rulers of the US had to build up buffer states in Western Europe. This involved big concessions to the working class there and back home in terms of jobs, living standards and social benefits. They also had to restore the Japanese economy and build up the economy of South Korea in order to confront and contain the PRC.

By the late 1960s, these allies in Western Europe and Japan were turning into significant competitors for US business. Meanwhile the US faced a military defeat in Vietnam. Later, in the early 1980s, the US suffered the ignominious failure of its attempts to rescue her Iranian embassy staff in the fiasco of Operation Eagle Claw.

How did US imperialism react? Of course, we know that they never for an instant relaxed their military efforts utterly brutally to assert world leadership. We should not, however, forget their economic and diplomatic efforts in the same direction.

There had been a post-war boom based on "reconstruction" of

areas devastated by war, but it was beginning to peter out by the mid-1960s. Starting in the 1960s and increasing as domestic contradictions grew in Western capitalist economies, investment and industrial activity was switched to “emerging economies”, first of all in southern Europe, and then in Turkey, Africa, South America and all the while in Asia. Labour was cheap and plentiful in those parts.

In the process, traditional areas of industry and of working-class activity were run down. This pulled the rug from under powerful working-class struggles to defend jobs, wages and conditions and the social benefits that they had gained. The emergence of the “rust belt” in the US, the defeat of the British miners and many other workers in metallurgy, manufacturing, construction, seafaring, printing and the docks here was the background for the “opportunities” thus offered to “emerging economies”. Effectively, imperialism managed to set workers in different parts of the world against each other. Ross refers to this globalisation process as “socialisation”, but it was also the exact opposite of genuine socialisation.

The exponential growth in international finance was a necessary part of this process. In this sphere, also, “in Marxist terms” the struggle between workers and employers over the creation and sharing-out of value is expressed in the series of crises in banking and finance which are a feature of world economy and of all national economies.

Under US President Nixon, an offer was made to the CPC leadership to become part of the “offshoring”. “Reform and Opening-Up” represents the CPC’s eventual acceptance of this offer. Now it is dressed up as an historic development of Marxism-Leninism, but at root it was a deal with imperialism which had a savage impact on workers and their organisations in the USA and western Europe.

Class relations in China

There has indeed been a colossal development of the productive forces in the PRC, but at the cost of reinforcing or even re-creating historically-outdated capitalist social relations.

The last 50 years have brought the world's largest working-class into being, but also a very powerful and ambitious capitalist class.

Ross's graphs shine no light on the distribution of wealth in boomtime China. A comparatively small number became extremely rich, while a large middle-class also grew. Meanwhile, a huge mass of the rural poor was sucked into the new industries as a working class. This working class is highly exploited, working long hours under extremely oppressive conditions. Reliable statistics are hard to come by, but by any standard workers' wages and conditions in China lag far behind those in the old industrial countries. According to a World Bank report, wages in China as a share of GDP declined from 53 per cent in 1998 to 41.4% in 2005, as compared with 57 per cent in the US. While Chinese legislation officially forbids over-work and super-exploitation of labour, these abuses, actually, seem to flourish unchecked. Independent trade unions run by their members are not tolerated. Campaigners who support workers' rights suffer brutal state repression. Workers who do not enjoy settled status are denied access to housing and other benefits. You can look at one report describing conditions at [What You Need to Know About Labor Conditions in China – RELEVANT \(relevantmagazine.com\)](http://www.relevantmagazine.com) . If you suspect that this US-based material is deliberately biased, you can also look at this 2009 report:

<https://www.waronwant.org/news-analysis/sweatshops-china> .

Since Ross refers rather freely to Marxism-Leninism, it is worth recalling how Marx reacted to the expansion of capitalism in Britain in the period referred to in his article. Marx said this at the foundation of the International Workingmen's Association – the First International:

“It is a great fact that the misery of the working masses has not diminished from 1848 to 1864, and yet this period is unrivaled for the development of its industry and the growth of its commerce. In 1850 a moderate organ of the British middle class, of more than average information, predicted that if the exports and imports of England were to rise 50 per

cent, English pauperism would sink to zero. Alas! On April 7, 1864, the Chancellor of the Exchequer delighted his parliamentary audience by the statement that the total import and export of England had grown in 1863 'to 443,955,000 pounds! That astonishing sum about three times the trade of the comparatively recent epoch of 1843!'

And what, Marx asks, was the impact of all this on poverty? He quotes "the Sixth Report on Public Health, published by order of Parliament in the course of the present year. What did the doctor discover? That the silk weavers, the needlewomen, the kid glovers, the stock weavers, and so forth, received on an average, not even the distress pittance of the cotton operatives, not even the amount of carbon and nitrogen 'just sufficient to avert starvation diseases'. 'Moreover:' – we quote from the report – 'as regards the examined families of the agricultural population, it appeared that more than a fifth were with less than the estimated sufficiency of carbonaceous food, that more than one-third were with less than the estimated sufficiency of nitrogenous food, and that in three counties (Berkshire, Oxfordshire, and Somersetshire) insufficiency of nitrogenous food was the average diet'. (Address to the International Workingmen's Association, Marxist Internet Archive).

Marx continues:

"These are painful reflections, especially when it is remembered that the poverty to which they advert is not the deserved poverty of idleness; in all cases it is the poverty of working populations. Indeed the work which obtains the scanty pittance of food is for the most part excessively prolonged. The report brings out the strange and rather unexpected fact: 'That of the division of the United Kingdom ... the agricultural population of England,' the richest division, 'is considerably the worst fed'; but that even the agricultural laborers of Berkshire, Oxfordshire, and Somersetshire fare better than great numbers of skilled indoor operatives of the East of London. Such are the official statements published by order of Parliament in 1864 ... at a

time when the Chancellor of the Exchequer told the House of Commons that 'the average condition of the British laborer has improved in a degree we know to be extraordinary and unexampled in the history of any country or any age'."

Not a good look

Chinese entrepreneurs and workers take the social relations described above with them when they settle abroad, for example in southern Africa. A typical report is this protest from the Zimbabwe Diamond Miners' Union: <https://newsofthesouth.com/zimbabwe-diamond-and-allied-minerals-workers-union-zdamwu-press-statement-over-the-shooting-of-employees-at-redeem-mine-in-the-midlands-province/>. They claim that two members of the union were actually shot when they went to see Chinese managers about unpaid wages.

The Rossing uranium mine in Namibia saw a terrific struggle against exploitation by western mining interests when the country was ruled by apartheid South Africa. Liverpool dockers and other trade unionists boycotted the movement of ore from this mine. Workers won a battle for union recognition and decent conditions. When Rio Tinto sold the mine to the China National Nuclear Corporation a few years ago, promises were made about continued recognition of the Miners Union of Namibia (MUN) and agreements at the site. However, since then the entire local site leadership of the MUN has been sacked and workers' rights are under attack.

Trade unionists at Piraeus, near Athens, complain that after much of the port (and large parts of the town around it) were taken over by the Chinese company COSCO, they found the culture of the new management showed absolutely no understanding of industrial participation and workers' rights. This account of a strike over a death at work in the port highlights lack of consultation over health and safety issues and the dangers involved in "back-to-back" shift working: Piraeus Port Workers Announce 48 Hour Strike Over Workplace Safety After Death Of Colleague (greekcitytimes.com).

Workers at a Chinese-owned copper mine in eastern Serbia held a protest on January 12 to demand higher wages and improved

working conditions. Several hundred workers at Zijin Bor Copper, located in the town of Bor, participated in the protest, calling for the Chinese company to respect the laws of Serbia and its Serbian workers.

Protester Srecko Karadzic told RFE/RL that he took part because of working conditions and because wages have not kept up with inflation.

"Insufficient respect for workers, insufficient respect for wages and standards," he said. "Everything is more expensive, and wages are the same."

Goran Nikolic, who also works at Zijin, told RFE/RL that the workers are intimidated and said there are lists of workers who protest. These workers are then transferred to other workplaces, making others afraid, he said.

A final point on Ross's statistics: He evokes historic periods of capitalist growth, but stops short at mentioning what happened next. At the end of the nineteenth century, Britain's dominance of world trade came under attack from newcomers such as Germany, Japan and the US, and this led to two world wars. The US is still top of the tree at the moment, and has been for nearly a century, but she is clearly struggling and flailing around economically and militarily. Japan and Germany are no longer the "miracle economies" that they were forty years ago. Chinese strategists are famous for taking the "long view". If the system of imperialism continues, how could the amazing economic growth of China's business economy and influence not lead to further convulsions and wars, as did the arrival of previous new claimants to imperial power? China obviously has the right (as should Venezuela and Cuba too) to engage in world trade without sanctions or boycotts. But China now engages in world trade as an industrial, trading and financial rival to the US and Europe. Without a profound shift in social relations and economy across the world, a shift in which the working class comes forward as the leading force able to remodel society, events must follow the same trajectory as they did in 1914 and 1939.

Marxism-Leninism: A miracle-cure?

Here it becomes necessary to quote more extensively from John Ross's posting:

"If the achievements of the CPC in improving the conditions of human beings are unparalleled the question is then obviously how was this achieved, what made it possible? This leads to an accurate measure of the achievements of the CPC in ideas, in theory.

"As is well known the CPC was founded under the impact of the 1917 Russian revolution, the first successful socialist revolution – which took place in an imperialist country. This fact, and the ideas of Marxism-Leninism which were learnt from these events, was on the one hand an immense initial advantage for China – as these were the world's most advanced economic, social and political ideas, the practicality and success of which had been proved by the 1917 revolution. But simultaneously, because these ideas were international, and not specifically developed for China, the CPC then had to undertake a long historical process of the "Sinicization" of Marxism – to integrate the analyses of Marxism, developed not only in a different country but in a different continent, with an understanding of China's specific reality.

"This led to mistakes by the CPC in its early period. As Xi Jinping noted: 'The young Communist Party of China once simply applied the general principles of Marxism-Leninism on the proletarian revolution and copied the experience of the Russian October Revolution in the urban armed uprisings, without fully considering China's national conditions and the reality of the Chinese revolution, causing the Chinese revolution to suffer serious setbacks.'

"This, and other major errors, resulted in the defeat of the urban based Chinese revolutionary wave in 1927. It was following this defeat that Mao Zedong progressively took undisputed leadership of the CPC. Mao Zedong's new strategy centred on a rural based revolution and victoriously culminated in the creation of the PRC in 1949."

Where to begin? For one thing, the Russian revolution could never be reduced to just "urban armed uprisings". In both 1905

and 1917, military defeats for the Russian Empire led to revolts in the army, whose rank-and-file consisted mainly of peasants. These played a highly significant role in the mass movements which in 1917 culminated in the establishment of a soviet government. The Bolsheviks were extremely aware of movements in the countryside and debated the issue carefully and continually.

The political training of the newly-formed Communist party of China and its leaders fell upon the Communist International (CI), which was established at an international congress in 1919. There can be no real understanding of the historical period evoked without some consideration of the role and ultimate fate of this body. Its aim was to share all the experiences of the revolutionary movement around the world and assist in the development of strategy and tactics. Naturally, the Russian revolutionary leaders had terrific authority in this, but the Bolsheviks devoted the same careful analytical attention to developments in other parts of the world as they had previously to social developments in the Russian Empire.

The Comintern Second Congress (1920) spent a considerable amount of time discussing the revolution in developing countries. It is particularly important for what happened later in China that they weighed extremely carefully what role the various social classes might play in the struggle against imperialism and the prospects for socialism. The Indian delegate M.N. Roy and the Korean Bolshevik Pak Chin-sun submitted theses to this Congress which dealt in some detail with these matters. Pak Chin-sun in particular explored social relations in the East and possible developments:

"The acute economic crisis in Asia, which is inevitable at the moment of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the imperialist great powers' barbaric policy in the colonies have created favourable conditions for revolution there. This policy has aroused strong nationalist tendencies in the East. Granted, the first stage of the revolution in the East will be the victory of the liberal bourgeoisie and the nationalist intellectuals, nevertheless, we must begin now to prepare our

forces for the second stage by drawing from the depths of the peasant masses, enslaved by the feudal regime, organised forces to carry out an agrarian revolution in Asia as soon as possible. The industrial proletariat in Asia, excluding Japan, is too weak for us to entertain any serious hopes of an early communist revolution, but the victory of the agrarian revolution is certain if we are able to master the immediate tasks of the great and bloody struggle”.

He points out:

“The question now is, what forces are propelling the revolution in the East? The majority of the former nobility, the liberal bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, which represent the intellectual forces of the revolution in Asia, have learned from the long years of struggle against foreign subjugation and from a process of agonising mental struggle. They have understood that the rebirth of the East is not possible except through the rule of the broad toiling masses”.

Pak Chin-sun added: “Two opposite roads lie open to Asia’s nationalists: the one leading to personal prosperity, based on the perpetual suffering and gradual degeneration of the great masses of the people; the other leading to the social revolution ...”

“Certainly, even in the revolutionary milieu there are also elements that unite with us, internationalists, only to attain national political liberation ... But should the revolution one day require it, we will know how to turn our arms against the ‘allies’ of yesterday”. (See Riddell [ed], *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite. Volume II of The Communist International in Lenin’s Time*, Pathfinder 1991 pp 860 and 861”.

The Communist Party of China was established in 1922. While it grew very quickly, it was also pitched very quickly into massive and dramatic struggles. The political training of its leadership was a major duty of the Communist International. However, at the same time the most powerful force in the CI, the Russian (after 1922 Soviet) leadership was undergoing a

rapid degeneration into a party-state bureaucracy, not without determined resistance from the genuine followers of Lenin. In the course of this struggle, the developing bureaucracy adopted anti-Communist measures such as suppressing discussion among the party membership, intimidating and harassing opponents. It also increasingly developed the cult of the infallible leader. All of this it imposed on the national parties affiliated to the CI. It also abused its position in the CI to bolster its own domestic situation, rather than to advance effective policies in each member Communist Party. (One of the most disgraceful aspects of the CPC 20th Congress is the full-on return to the personality cult and exceptional powers granted to a single individual, Xi, directly copying the degeneration in the Soviet Union in the 10 years after the Russian revolution.)

China was in a profound crisis in the 1920s. The revolution against the Qing dynasty and the age-old social relations of the Chinese empire had broken out in 1911. This movement struggled to establish itself and at the same time to confront foreign imperialist inroads. The national movement which crystallised in Sun Yat-sen's Guo Min Dang (KMT) was unable to establish a new national government. Large swathes of the country were controlled by local warlords.

In the mid-1920s, the CI and the CPC provided enormous practical support to the KMT's military campaign to defeat the warlords ("the Northern Expedition").

Unfortunately, they convinced themselves and others that the bourgeois-dominated KMT (run after Sun Yat-sen's death by Chiang Kai-shek) would continue to be the vehicle for social progress in China for a considerable time, and that it was dominated by a left-wing sympathetic to the masses of workers and peasants. This was the "line" passed down from Stalin and Bukharin.

But it turned out that the social conflicts in China could not be contained in that way. Workers and peasants responded massively to the campaign in their own way. In response, the right wing of the KMT rallied its forces, side-lined the weak

KMT Left and inflicted serious defeats on the movement in Canton in 1926 and in Shanghai in 1927.

The veteran Communist Peng-Shu-tse described events in this way:

"Thus, even though the CCP led the Shanghai workers in an armed insurrection on March 21, 1927, which succeeded in destroying the control of the Northern warlords and occupying Shanghai (except for the foreign concessions), with armed workers organised to maintain peace and order, they could not establish a revolutionary regime based on the working class. Such a regime would have initiated a dictatorship against the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie and, in particular, would have opposed and defeated the coup plotted by Chiang Kai-shek's bandit gang. They could not do this because it would destroy 'KMT-CCP collaboration', obstruct the line of a 'bloc of four classes' and especially disrupt the business of Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition. Even though the CCP had taken Shanghai and gained the support of the entire working class and a majority of the lower petty-bourgeoisie, along with the sympathy of a section of the soldiers, in order to adhere to the Comintern's policy of a 'coalition government of four classes,' the CCP could do nothing but establish a Shanghai provisional government in collaboration with the bourgeoisie. Those representatives of the bourgeoisie 'elected' to serve in the provisional government used sabotage and opposition, under Chiang Kai-shek's direction, to paralyse the government and prepare the way for Chiang's next coup."

Understandably Peng continues: "Under these circumstances, the CCP slipped into a period of exceptional distress and dilemma." (Peng Shu-tse, introduction to Leon Trotsky on China, Pathfinder, 1976, pp 64 and 65). It was not that the principles of Marxism-Leninism were abstract truisms which requires translation from some Olympian height into the particular circumstances of each separate country: in fact it was Stalin who imposed a political "line" in China in defiance of the views of Marx and especially Lenin. This line, of subordinating the workers and peasants to the Guo Min Dang,

disoriented the movement and led to a serious defeat. The leaders of the USSR after Lenin's death did try to impose "one size fits all" political lines on Communist Parties around the world. This was clear in the sectarian policies of the "Third Period" after 1928, and the switch to "Popular Front" alliances after 1933. Stalin's Marxist opponents insisted that the general features of world politics are expressed in different proportions in each country, demanding political solutions appropriate to local conditions, and sharp awareness of developing events and changes; but their voices were stifled.

"Under these circumstance", Mao's turn to the countryside was more a pragmatic adjustment to a catastrophic situation than an original development of Marxist theory. (It is true that he learned enough to take future Soviet advice with a pinch of salt!).

How fundamental a principle was the turn to rural guerrilla warfare? For fifty years after the establishment of the PRC, leftist forces around the world have tried to emulate Mao's success through guerrilla warfare. There have been inspiring and determined struggles. Huge sacrifices have been made in the East, in Africa and in Central and South America. However, as we stand today, the results are mostly very disappointing. From Algeria to Zimbabwe, through the entire alphabet in Africa, states which have won independence at least in part through guerrilla struggles have ended up run by local kleptocracies where hints and clues of some sort of socialism are increasingly rare and the main "growth" has been in the overseas bank accounts of the autocratic rulers.

Cuba is an exception. But even the Cuban government now spends a lot of its time helping former guerrilla movements, as in Colombia, to make peace deals with the capitalist client states they have been fighting for 50 years. The balance sheet of half a century of imitating the Maoism of the 1930s and 1940s is this: that many of the imitators have spent the last two decades or more trying to disentangle themselves from it. And now, while Ross celebrates the "Marxism-Leninism" of Mao,

Xi urges supporters around the world to collaborate with the local capitalists. He proposes the exact same mistake that was inflicted on the young CPC by Stalin in the mid 1920s.

As the apartheid regime was being taken apart in the early 1990s, Nelson Mandela assured trade unionists there that the country's wealth would be nationalised. At the same time the advice he actually adopted – from the Chinese – was to leave foreign multi-national corporations in charge of extracting and processing the country's minerals.

What sort of "Marxism-Leninism"?

Ross contrasts the ultimate failure of the USSR to the heady successes of the PRC, against the background of a rather terse account of 20th Century economic history:

"...the great crisis of the 1930s, which culminated in the Second World War itself, was dominated by two economic features. First domestic investment collapsed, second international trade and investment radically declined. Expressed in Marxist terms, therefore, from 1929 to World War II socialisation of labour was drastically reduced, leading to the prediction of a huge decline in production – which duly occurred".

What "socialisation" meant for Lenin we shall see in a moment. Ross's bald account of the events in world economy since 1929 could figure in any account (by a "Marxist-Leninist" or any moderately well-informed economist). For Ross, imperialism is a matter of different policies followed at different times by imperialist powers: now low-investment, leading to falling world trade, autarky and mass unemployment; at another time lively investment, especially internationally, leading to growing production and expanding trade. The decisions of those in charge, for Ross, do not flow from the very nature of imperialism as a stage in capitalist society, blundering from crisis to crisis. Following his approach, one might wish that world leaders had set up the WTO and the World Bank in the early 1930s, and avoided all the unpleasantness that followed! The actual Lenin had a very different understanding of imperialism:

"From all that has been said above on the economic essence of imperialism, it follows that it must be characterised as capitalism in transition, or, more precisely, as dying capitalism. It is very instructive in this connection to note that the bourgeois economists, in describing the newest capitalism, currently employ terms like 'interlocking', 'absence of isolation,' etc; banks are 'enterprises which, by their functions and course of development, are not purely private business enterprises; more and more they are growing out of the sphere of purely business regulation'. And the same Riesser who spoke these last words, declares in all seriousness that the 'prophecy' of the Marxists concerning 'socialisation' 'has not been realised'.

"What then, is the meaning of this word 'interlocking? ... When a big enterprise becomes a gigantic one, and, working on the basis of exactly computed mass data, systematically organises the supply of primary raw materials to the extent of two-thirds or three-fourths of all that is necessary for tens of millions of people; when those raw materials are transported to the most suitable places of production, sometimes hundreds or thousands of miles from each other, in a systematic and organised manner; when one centre controls all the successive stages of working up the raw materials right up to the manufacture of numerous varieties of finished articles; when these products are distributed according to a single plan among tens and hundreds of millions of consumers ... then it becomes evident that we have socialisation of production going on before our eyes, and not mere 'interlocking'; that private business relations, and private property relations, constitute a shell which is no longer suitable to its contents, a shell which must inevitably begin to decay if its removal is postponed by artificial means; a shell which may continue in a state of decay for a comparatively long period (particularly if the cure of the opportunist abscess is protracted), but which will inevitably be removed." (Lenin: Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism").

Whatever "socialisation" means for Ross, in Leninist terms it

refers to the revolt of the productive forces against the relations of production, or as Marx said:

“The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder.” (Marx, Capital vol. I).

For Lenin “private business relations, and private property relations, constitute a shell which may continue in a state of decay for a comparatively long period (particularly is the cure of the opportunist abscess is protracted), but which will inevitably be removed”. The CPC leadership has “improved” and “developed” this Marxist-Leninist conception to the point of vastly expanding the “opportunist abscess”.

Ross’s article on the significance of the CPC 12th Congress, and his version of the history of that party, present Marxism-Leninism in terms which considerably confuse the matter.

Bob Archer

February 2023

The crisis in Numsa: The lessons and the way forward

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“We, the members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), firmly commit ourselves to a United South Africa, free of oppression and economic exploitation”

This proud and defiant statement opens the Preamble to the Numsa

Constitution, which goes on to assert “that this can only be achieved under the leadership of an organised and united working class”.

The Preamble lists the conditions under which this struggle can be successful, including:

“(a) fight and oppose all forms of discrimination” in the trade union, the workplace and society.

“(c) ensure that all levels of the union are democratically structured and controlled by the members themselves through elected worker committees.”

“(d) encourage democratic worker leadership and organisation in our factories and in all spheres of society.” (“Preamble to the Constitution” at: <https://numsa.org.za/numsa-constitution/>)

And yet, it seems that this crucial trade union has fallen under the control of a dictatorial and corrupt special-interest clique. Union activists claim that this clique imposes its authority in flagrant breach of the principles expressed in the Preamble to the Union’s Constitution.

They complain about the union-linked “3Sixty Life” insurance scheme which has “been placed under curatorship by the court because it was not having sufficient funds to guarantee pay-outs for Numsa members who are policyholders”.

They mention an auditors’ report “which shows how millions were paid out to people for dubious reasons such as undefined services rendered and monies going to a birthday party for (National Secretary Irvin) Jim and a laptop to his daughter.”

They complain about “disruptions of Regional Congress not supporting the re-election of the same Regional Office Bearers and National Office Bearers”, “the sending in of thugs to disrupt and mess up the Ekurhuleni Regional Executive Committee and Regional Congress” and “the violation of the NUMSA Constitution by suspending 53Shopstewards will-nilly” (“Save Our NUMSA” flyer posted on facebook Lindi Lee WaliWorking Class

Friends Of Instimbi Ayigobi).

Numsa's history of struggle

It was the rise of the working class organised in trade unions like Numsa which forced the imperialists and their racist supporters in South Africa between 1990 and 1994 to abandon apartheid and adopt some of the trappings (if not the substance) of an advanced democracy.

The activists who built Numsa strove to mobilise the whole masses to overthrow imperialism-capitalism as the cause of South Africa's subjugation. They expressed their stance in the Workers' Charter (adopted by Numsa in 1987) which explained:

"...the most urgent task facing us as workers, as black workers and as part of the black oppressed, is to use our organised strength both at the point of production and among our communities, to put an end to the race tyranny and to help bring about a united, non-racial, non-sexist democratic South Africa based on one person one vote, as broadly defined in the Freedom Charter.

"That, we see the winning of such a non-racial democracy as part of a continuous process of creating conditions for the building of a socialist society which will be in the interests of all our people; a society free of all exploitation of person by person which alone can complete the liberation objectives in all spheres of social life."

Foremost among the "conditions for the building of a socialist society" is the matter of revolutionary leadership, an international party through which the masses "can complete the liberation objectives in all spheres of social life".

The advanced workers who framed this charter could only conceive it being carried out by ensuring "that all levels of the union are democratically structured and controlled by the members themselves through elected worker committees" and encouraging "democratic worker leadership and organisation in our factories and in all spheres of society" as we saw above.

SACP and ANC

The officially-recognised liberation movement for South Africa was dominated politically by an alliance between the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC). The SACP was in turn dominated politically by the line of “peaceful co-existence” between the Soviet bloc and the imperialist world that was promulgated by the USSR under Stalin and his successors. Against the thrust of the “Workers’ Charter”, Stalinists deliberately confined the struggle against colonialism and imperialism to the achievement of national independence and alleged democratic goals, leaving the fight for a socialist society to some unstated time in the future.

Stalinism’s allies in the African National Congress were in turn mainly tribal and middle-class elites and their supporters. They tolerated and even adopted a radical political rhetoric which they never had the slightest intention of following through once they achieved their own, limited class aims.

The SACP-ANC alliance is not and never was under the control of any workers’ democracy. This alliance looked for recognition to bourgeois, indeed imperialist, states and international bodies based in Europe and North America. While the anti-apartheid leaders toured the diplomatic circuit on the one hand, the numbers of young fighters who fled repression in South Africa in the late 1970s to the uMkonto we Sizwe (armed wing of the ANC) camps abroad got short shrift from their own leaders. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up after the end of apartheid found that the use of torture by uMkhonto we Sizwe against their own members in these camps was “routine”, as were executions “without due process”.

At the same time, dissenting voices in the black townships in South Africa were brutally silenced by kangaroo courts and “necklacings”.

Prominent leaders associated with the ANC-SACP alliance, like Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa went on to become Presidents of the country. With cold contempt for the working class and the masses, they set about enriching themselves while their country saw growing poverty, lack of

service delivery and general instability. Ramaphosa was able to dislodge and replace Zuma because the latter was so blatantly in the pocket of the Gupta business clan, but Ramaphosa himself was exposed when other, less prominent, thieves made off with large sums in illicit cash that had been concealed in the furniture at his farm.

The whole tradition of the ANC and SACP alliance is one of high-handed contempt for the ordinary workers and their organisations. It was the revolt of workers and young people that made it impossible to carry on with the apartheid regime, but the government of South Africa was eventually passed to the Mbekis, Zumas and Ramaphosas courtesy of the international bodies of imperialism and the mining and other companies which, from Europe and America and elsewhere, still loot the country's resources and benefit from cheap African labour. Soviet and Chinese leaders also stood as godparents to the new state.

(For a fuller understanding of the history and role of the ANC and its relationship with working-class organisations, see at the end of this article, the appendix *The ANC and Numsaby* my comrade Hewat Beukes).

Stalinism and Pan-Africanism

Above all, the new liberation leaders of South Africa were trained and brought up in the tradition of Stalinist politics which prevailed in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death and which explicitly abandoned the international struggle for socialism. In place of that struggle, the leaders of the USSR and the world movement which they brutally dominated looked for "peaceful co-existence" with whatever (capitalist) allies they might find abroad. The specific application of this in colonies and former colonies was to find allies among national elites keen on independence but equally keen on maintaining their privileges.

Organisations like South-West Africa Peoples' Movement (Swapo) devoted great efforts to achieving recognition at the United Nations and elsewhere as the one and only true liberation fighters, meanwhile deliberately slandering and side-lining the genuine liberation fighters in Namibia.

The roots of bureaucracy

In the 1920s, after the Russian Revolution, in the USSR a social caste came to the fore which usurped the power of the working class exercised through the workers' and peasants' soviets and also closed down – often violently – any debate in the Communist Party. Trotsky described and analysed this development in his well-known study, *The Revolution Betrayed*. What interests us here is what Trotsky says about the character of this bureaucracy and its regime:

“The poverty and cultural backwardness of the masses has again become incarnate in the malignant figure of the ruler with a great club in his hand. The deposed and abused bureaucracy” (i.e. of the old, abolished Tsarist autocracy – BA) “from being a servant of society, has again become its lord. On this road it has attained such a degree of social and moral alienation from the popular masses, that it cannot now permit any control over either its activities or its income” (*The Revolution Betrayed*, London 1967, p.113).

The men and women who led the Russian Revolution of 1917 were members of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (later re-named the Communist Party). They stood out for their steadfast devotion to the cause in the face of Tsarist brutality and dictatorship. They were equally devoted to training themselves theoretically and practically to guide the working class and broader masses. They frequently had to pay with their lives for their convictions.

But after Lenin's death and once the new bureaucratic caste administering the new state had usurped workers' soviet democracy, all these characteristics were turned on their heads. Loyalty to the cause of the working class was replaced by blind loyalty to the Party and ultimately the Party leader. The practical and theoretical discipline required to defeat the Tsarist police state was replaced by unquestioning subservience to allegedly infallible leaders.

Already in 1920, during the Second Congress of the Communist International, Lenin had this to say to certain over-enthusiastic and dogmatic “Left-Communists”:

“...how is the discipline of the revolutionary party of the proletariat

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 firmness, self-sacrifice and heroism. Secondly by its ability to link itself with, to keep in touch with, and, to a certain degree, if you will, merge itself with the broadest masses of the toilers – primarily with the proletarian, but also with the non-proletarian toiling masses. Thirdly, by the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard and by the correctness of its political strategy and tactics, provided that the broadest masses become convinced of this correctness by their own experience ... Without these conditions all attempts to establish discipline are inevitably transformed into trifling phrase-mongering and empty gestures". (*Left-Wing Communism; An Infantile Disorder*).

Here are the most deep-rooted origins of the high-handed arrogance of trade union leaders like Irvin Jim, as of "liberation" leaders like Zuma, Ramaphosa, Nujoma and Geingob. Jim has surrounded himself with a clique bound together by self-interest, and this clique is lashing out at anyone who stands in its way. They expel members of the union, close down regions, disrupt meetings and remove the essential personal protection of "dissident" leaders of the union.

This whole monolithic approach to differences and debate is the creation of Stalinism. First, we must say that political parties of the working class require a different set of mutual obligations between leaders and members from what needs to prevail in trade unions, which by their nature must embrace at least the majority of workers in a particular trade, sector or region, irrespective of their ideology and politics. Workers' unity in action can only be achieved through the broadest possible discussion and freedom of expression. That is the significance of the passage written by Lenin and quoted above.

Comrades will – or should – know that in building the party which ultimately led the Russian Revolution to victory, Lenin and his supporters laid enormous stress upon the responsibilities a revolutionary party imposes upon its members. They openly broke (in 1903) from others who had a much more relaxed attitude to this very question. Experience showed that the Lenin faction (Bolsheviks) went on to lead the Russian

Revolution and the opposing faction (Mensheviks) attempted to strangle it.

Nevertheless, it is wrong and out of place to impose the constitution of a revolutionary political party onto the functioning of a trade union.

Numsa specifically has a well-established tradition of free and open confrontation between different political tendencies.

In any case, in any part of the world any major action by workers is always prepared by a seething low-level but widespread process of argument and debate at the workplace, in the pub, on the terraces of a sporting event or at home and with the wider family and even sometimes in religious congregations. That is the springboard for the official discussions and decisions at workplace meetings, union branches, regional and national executives, etc. **Nothing could be further from the mark, by the way, than the accusations in the bourgeois media that this or that trade union leader can “call their members out” on strike at the drop of a hat.**

But even in a political party, even a revolutionary party operating under conditions of illegality, as Lenin's Bolshevik Party did for many years, it is a myth that a “line” elaborated by some “luder maximo” was submissively adopted, passed on and carried out by automatons in the ranks. Unfortunately, it is that very mistaken conception that has since then been accepted as “democratic centralism” in many circles, even among groups who claim to oppose bureaucratic methods.

On top of demanding automatic obedience, would-be bureaucrats in the movement skilfully pick on alleged “bourgeois” traits in members and activists who might raise awkward questions or oppose some nonsensical “line” that is being promulgated. All sorts of sly comments and innuendoes can undermine those who are genuinely trying to build the movement and want to question the “line” that is being handed out. Not infrequently false accusations that this or that person is an “agent” can be used to side-line the person concerned and contribute to an atmosphere of paranoia.

Often, activists are driven into huge and fruitless rounds of activity

which turn out to be pointless and lead to demoralisation. Such methods have unfortunately become widespread, and are often sanctified as “Bolshevik”.

This is what Trotsky said about the culture of revolutionary parties in 1936 in *The Revolution Betrayed*:

“The inner regime of the Bolshevik Party was characterised by the method of *democratic centralism*. The combination of these two concepts, democracy and centralism, is not in the least contradictory. The party took watchful care not only that its boundaries should always be strictly defined, but that all those who entered these boundaries should enjoy the actual right to define the direction of the party policy. Freedom of criticism and intellectual struggle was an irrevocable content of the party democracy. The present doctrine that Bolshevism does not tolerate factions is a myth of the epoch of decline”. (*ibid.* pp 94-95).

These profound issues of working-class organisation and leadership may seem to be forgotten details of history. But they assume new significance as the working class around the world awakens after a period of setbacks and defeats to a new round of struggles. It is hard to overstate the scope and significance of these past experiences now, as the economic crisis, openly acknowledged and unresolved for over a decade, lingers on and both established and “wannabe” imperialist powers square up against each other, beating the drums of war.

One of the very earliest signs of this working-class recovery was the wages struggle of platinum miners at Marikana in 2012, their sharp confrontation with officials of the National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa, the planned and coldly executed murder of striking miners by the South African police and the subsequent mass strike wave. It was within the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa that the most positive response to these events was raised. The subsequent development of that initiative, the different tendencies involved and the methods by which they propose to carry forward the struggle, deserve careful thought and attention. Vital past experiences of the working-class movement need

to be revived in the process of educating a new generation of fighters.

The meaning of Marikana

The deliberate killing of 34 miners at the Lonmin platinum mine in Marikana, Rustenberg, North West Province, by the South African Police Service on 16 August 2012, at the instigation of the mine's UK-based owners and with the agreement of the then South African government minister (and now President), Cyril Ramaphosa, underlined in the most dramatic way possible how correct the Numsa Constitution Preamble was to say that the ending of "oppression and economic exploitation" can only be achieved "under the leadership of an organised and united working class".

The former, avowedly "Marxist", and indeed vocal leader in the past of the South African Mineworkers' Union, Cyril Ramaphosa had been one of that leadership of the African National Congress and South African Communist Party who were prepared to accept an end to Apartheid rule and introduction of "one person one vote" in exchange for abandoning any aim of a socialist South Africa. The state murders at Marikana – and remember that Cyril Ramaphosa explicitly signed off for the police violence – laid bare the profound betrayal of the working class and masses which that settlement represented.

Under a "liberation" regime of African National Congress, South African Communist Party and trade union confederation Cosatu, "independent" South Africa had to try to move forward with economic power still vested chiefly in the great imperialist monopolies and banks which had grown rich by exploiting labour of every country and ethnic background and plundering natural resources around the world.

Political democracy and effective administration on behalf of the people of South Africa has remained a fantasy while political power has been exercised by puppets of these monopolies and banks, by the Ramaphosas, the Zumas and the Mbekes. Such politicians can only function as the boot-lickers and facilitators of imperialist oppression and exploitation.

At the most basic level, they have led a systematic looting of the nation's wealth and resources for personal gain. At a political level, they very quickly abandoned any progressive policies for the development

of the country and instead adopted wholesale the nostrums of the neo-liberal International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other imperialist agencies of world governance. Their venal incompetence has added economic chaos and widespread lawlessness to the existing poverty of the majority.

This was what was at stake in the preceding conflict discussed above between Numsa's "Workers' Charter" and the politics of the ANC-SACP.

But as apartheid was dismantled between 1990 and 1994, the issue was fudged. ANC leaders declared that workers' demands could be accommodated within the scope of the Freedom Charter. They assured trade unionists that, for example, South Africa's mineral resources now belonged to the people, although in fact, the imperialist monopoly groups kept a grip of the extraction, refining and export of the nation's wealth, and thus of their enormous profits. Dissenting voices were drowned out in the wave of publicity greeting the new order, and by violence and the threat of violence.

The fudge continued. While the ANC-SACP government moved over more and more clearly to abandon any hope of progressive legislation and towards directly neo-liberal policies, there was opposition from trade unionists. There were angry confrontations, but they were contained within the Tripartite Alliance of ANC-SACP and the union confederation Cosatu.

The real rupture did not emerge until after Marikana, the massacre and the massive wave of strikes across different trades and industries which followed.

Numsa Special National Congress 2013

In the wake of the Marikana massacre, Numsa led a fight within Cosatu to break the trade union federation from the alliance with the SACP and the ANC. For that reason, Numsa was expelled from Cosatu and, alongside a number of other trade unions, established a new South African Federation of Trade Unions" (Saftu). Numsa also worked towards and held a Special National Congress in December 2013 to draw the lessons of the Marikana massacre and chart a new course of independent socialist struggle.

The documents of the Numsa Special National Congress held in December

2013 (after a through debate throughout the trade union) still make compelling reading:

“2.2 The South African Communist Party (SACP) leadership has become embedded in the state and is failing to act as the vanguard of the working class ...

For the struggle for socialism, the working class needs a political organisation committed in theory and practice to socialism ...

3.2 As Numsa, we must lead in the establishment of a new UNITED FRONT that will coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities ...

3.3 ... we must explore the establishment of a MOVEMENT FOR SOCIALISM as the working class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa”.

Also, the union must: “Commission an international study on the historical formation of working-class parties. As part of this study we need to explore the different type of parties, from mass workers’ parties to vanguard parties. (Quoted in *Movement for Socialism! South Africa’s NUMSA points the way*”, Workers’ International, 2014, pp 4 and 5)

While the resolutions and documents of the 2013 Special National Congress clearly name and identify the direction of travel of the SACP, ANC and Cosatu leadership, there is no clarity about the treacherous political tradition underlying it – Stalinism. A weakness of the Special National Congress decisions was that they still expressed illusions in the Stalinist politics of the settlement which ended apartheid and the hope that the Freedom Charter might leave a door open for future progress.

The 2013 Congress documents correctly identified how “In many post-colonial and post-revolutionary situations, liberation and revolutionary movements have turned on labour movements that fought alongside them, suppressed them, marginalised them, split them, robbed them of their independence or denied them any meaningful role”. (ibid p.4).

However, under the sub-heading “ANC has abandoned the Freedom Charter and any change in property relations”, the Declaration of the Numsa Special

National Congress says:

“The Freedom Charter as the basis of our existence as an alliance, the glue that brought the alliance together, has not found expression in government policies. In fact the ANC no longer adheres to it. The ANC has not only departed from the Freedom Charter, but also from the Morogoro Conference core values and the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP).

“The ANC-led government continues to ignore and duck the question of how to fundamentally change property relations in the country”. (ibid. p. 22)

It reads as if most comrades had grasped that the liberation regime in South Africa has not brought the benefits which were promised, but had not yet taken on board the fact that the SACP's Stalinist politics of an alliance with the bourgeois nationalists had always meant that imperialism-capitalism would stay in the driving seat. The Irvin Jim leadership never resolved the contradiction at the heart of the ANC/SACP/Cosatu alliance, that as a “liberation” regime it acts as a caretaker or “Comprador” (local business agent) on behalf of imperialism.

The policy of Stalinism has lived on even after the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union has gone into the dustbin. The departing gift of the Russian Stalinist bureaucracy to imperialism was to replace apartheid with a group of politicians in charge in South Africa who were very ready to enrich themselves by selling out the masses.

Stalinism's afterlife

Stalinist rule in the USSR and her satellites collapsed over thirty years ago. It is dead and buried. How are we to explain that Stalinist methods have been reborn at the very head of Numsa, a trade union born in mass workers' struggles which has consistently been foremost in fighting in a principled way for workers' interests against all comers?

Since the 1970s. US imperialism had been wooing the Chinese Communist Party government of the People's Republic of China. Mao and the leaders who followed him gladly facilitated a massive transfer of industry from North America and Western Europe to China. While this has led to spectacular (and desperately needed) economic growth and development in

China, it has deeply damaged the ground on which the US and European workers' movements stood. Whole working-class communities have been undermined, weakened, and demoralised as jobs were transferred abroad. It was a movement which had been underway for decades, but the open door into China has accelerated it massively.

At the same time, attempts by the Soviet bureaucracy to self-reform blew up in their faces. In the early 1990s the Soviet Union fell apart. The oppressed and resentful masses in the Soviet bloc "satellites" seized their chance at independence. Many workers had had their hopes in a socialist society dashed by their experience of nearly five decades of brutal rule from the Kremlin through local satraps. Very quickly they were plunged into economic and political chaos as the old links with the disappearing Soviet Union and Comecon were not immediately or easily replaced by new ones.

On top of the industrial devastation of the old working-class centres came a huge deluge of propaganda against socialism which aimed, especially, to discredit the idea that the working class can play a revolutionary role in the transformation of society. This very idea has been bitterly attacked, and those who upheld it marginalised, not least by many former activists in and around Stalinist parties.

All these conditions have combined to keep a generation or more of workers away from socialist politics. This was reflected in the growth of xenophobia amongst workers, and the domination of left-wing politics by middle-class, university-educated people and moralistic or what are nowadays called "cultural" issues and methods. Indeed, it has been among these layers that such obvious signs of the crisis of capitalism-imperialism as the financial crisis which started in 2008 led to a renewed interest in Marx and Marxism. The unemployed and the poor flocked into the squares across the USA and Europe to demonstrate and protest and shake a fist at the rich, without any practical political programme, while the intelligentsia crowded into the libraries to study and write about, among others, Marx.

In fact, Marxism became the flavour of the month, but mainly in quite restricted academic and student circles. And mostly even these circles

were interested in going “beyond capital” in peaceful ways. What has become prominent, and had a significant impact at a policy level, is a warmed-over version of the work of John Maynard Keynes. He and his followers after World War II aimed (1) to curb the tendencies to crisis within imperialist world economy and control business and finance through regulation and (2) through various forms of the “welfare state” to make life tolerable for the working class, at least in the leading imperialist states. Keynesianism fell into disrepute at the end of the post-World War II economic boom in the 1960s. “Supply-side” economists pointed out that many of the safeguards that had been put in place were actually barriers to individual capitalists getting very rich. The new economic doctrines, when put into practice, produced a series of banking and stock exchange crises since the mid-1990s. These have led to public critiques of capitalist economy which have turned away from the fundamental relationships of capitalist society – the exploitation of human labour power in the expanded reproduction of capital and the growing contradiction between the forces of production and the social relations of production. Writers like the widely-acclaimed Thomas Picketty do not trouble their heads about the *source* of capital and its essential nature. Instead, they devote hundreds and thousands of pages to the evils of inequality. They do not consider the class struggle and its outcome, but concentrate on ways to arrange a fairer society without smashing up the furniture. This approach is reflected in some of the most prominent and ambitious socialist leaders – leaders who have a genuine and significant following – like Senator Bernie Sanders in the USA and Labour Members of Parliament John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK.

Meanwhile the passing decades have re-shaped world economy. Parts of the Americas south of the Rio Grande, the Pacific Rim (Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, India and Pakistan), parts of the Middle East (Turkey, Egypt) have considerable industrial bases, and have in some cases become significant financial centres. Russia and her Confederation of Independent States (CIS) partners have become an important source of raw materials, hydrocarbons, and grain (as we know now from painful experience!).

China is now “workshop of the world” with one of the largest economies –

second only to the United States. While state power (which includes great power of the economy and banking) lies in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party, this economy is an integral part of world imperialism. For decades it has depended on exploiting the Chinese working class to an extraordinary degree and on selling the products of their labour on the world market. Chinese businesses are now among the biggest and most advanced in the world.

In today's clash of imperialist rivals, China strives to extend her commercial and economic power in order to engage effectively in competition with the United States and Europe. In the nature of imperialism, behind commerce and diplomacy lurks the threat of war. Imperialist rivals clash over territorial control in order to gain access to raw materials and markets. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Dutch, British and French East India Companies established commercial networks which provided the capital to start the industrial revolution. Although purely commercial at the beginning, these networks soon required the establishment of naval and military bases. Later, these networks hardened into formal colonial empires.

Today, China is starting a similar process based on the "New Silk Road" initiative to set up her own network. Like any imperialist power, China needs pliant customers and willing providers of cheap raw materials in its dependencies around the world, as well as robust logistical links.

In past centuries, Britain extended her imperial rule by "liberating" parts of Latin America from Spanish rule. American imperialism assumed the same mantle of the "liberator" in Cuba and the Philippines in the early twentieth century, and in the name of freedom and democracy supplanted Britain, France and Holland in most of their former colonial possessions after World War II. With remarkably few actual colonies, the USA has been the main colonialist-imperialist power for nearly a century. Now China offers her support to countries chafing under the economic domination of the United States. In all these cases, subject populations need to scrutinise very carefully indeed the credentials of any would-be liberator.

Multipolar World

One feature of imperialism is that formerly insignificant and weak nations have been able relatively quickly to claw their way to a powerful position at the top table among the great powers. In the 19th Century, previously quite unimportant nations, like Germany and Japan, were able to hurtle into prominence over a comparatively short period, in mere decades. Of course, they could not achieve this by the tried and tested and time-consuming means of a bourgeois revolution and the achievement of modern democracy, as happened in Britain, Holland, the USA and France.

By-passing a final knock-down, drag 'em out confrontation between the rising bourgeoisie and the old feudal rulers, Germany and Japan under powerful central governments cherry-picked the aspects of the technical, industrial and political achievements of the earlier capitalist states that would enable them to become great powers, successfully applying the very latest techniques in all these fields. The achievements which had cost the older states centuries to bring about were absorbed in their latest developments and as a massive transfer of knowledge, science and theory. This could only happen under a very tight central control, which is why some Marxists refer to it as the "Prussian" road to capitalist development.

The capitalist class of the USA was playing with fire when they started to provide the People's Republic of China with access to world markets and specifically the advanced technology on which modern industry is based. Maybe they assumed that the development of capitalism in China would undermine the rule of the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army. To be sure, that state has had to change in significant ways to accommodate the changes in Chinese society since the 1970s.

However, China has followed the real logic of the modern imperialist epoch. The Chinese state made it clear in the way it dealt with the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989 and the re-integration of Hong Kong more recently that there is no intention of introducing any measures of democracy. To succeed in an imperialist world, China has to be able to face down the present great powers of imperialism.

The claim that what the CCP is doing is a sort of extended form of the New Economic Policy adopted in the Soviet Union at the end of the Civil

War and the wars of intervention in order to restore a national economy which had been largely destroyed is by the way laughable. A wealthy Chinese bourgeoisie has grown up in the decades since Nixon's first visit. Rule by the CCP, protection by the CCP and support from the CCP have made this a rich class. Its wealth and privileges are tightly bound up with the Chinese state, and depend on how the Chinese state conducts its diplomatic, economic, and political affairs.

There are indeed inevitable contradictions between the interests of that state and the functioning of those Chinese businesses which, for example, would like to trade their shares in US stock markets. Some big Chinese operators with interests abroad who probably hoped they were too big to push around have been brought sharply to heel by the Chinese government recently. But this does not mean that the CCP is about to abolish capitalism in China anytime soon.

The old imperialist powers confront China militarily, asserting the right to send naval battle groups to patrol China's home waters. They confront her diplomatically and politically.

China goes ahead modernising her armed forces and building up her trading networks across the world. These are both elements of hard power, reflecting the weight of China's capitalist economy.

China also deploys soft power, seeking allies and front-men around the world to enhance her image and reputation.

So, money is spent resurrecting the old traditions of Pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism and the Bandung movement of "non-aligned" states. In the past, these were deployed in order to win allies for the USSR, while deflecting genuinely revolutionary movements (which only caused trouble as far as official Communist Parties were concerned). Although the USSR no longer exists, the idea of backing China (supported by Russia) as a rival to US hegemony is put forward and finds fertile soil because so many political careerists with a past in the Stalinist movement resonate to this logic of development without a workers' revolution. China presents herself as a friend of the local bourgeoisies in the "Global South", a big sister who will support them against the fatal effects of

US imperialism.

What of the masses?

The only problem is the working class and the masses. In China itself, as throughout Asia, Africa and South America, the working class is exploited more ruthlessly and thoroughly than it still is in Europe, North America and Australasia, where there are still remnants of the social gains workers made in the 20th century. The conditions in the rest of the world are such that in many of these countries up to 40 percent of the population are without any access to the means of production – they are unemployed.

Small-scale farming is squeezed out by big agricultural monopolies. The history of imperialism has littered the scene with remnants of national, ethnic and religious groups excluded from modern life. Millions scrape an “informal” living in modern slums. No “radical” alliances with allegedly-progressive capitalists are going to equip these masses with a way forward. **Of all the classes in the “global south”, only the working class is a progressive force able to weld all the other oppressed and exploited groups together and point the way forward.** This is the real meaning of the 2013 Special National Congress of Numsa and the policies that it adopted, even if that was not completely clear to those who pushed ahead on that.

It was clear at the time that Irvin Jim was not rejecting Stalinist politics; he was merely emphasising – often in a striking way – that the ANC-SACP government was “failing to deliver” for the South African masses. He did not go on to analyse the roots of that failure in the persistent influence of Stalinist conceptions.

So, the promise offered by Numsa’s Special National Congress has been frustrated. Building a United Front and an alliance with the impoverished communities never happened. No “Movement for Socialism” was established. There was no clarification of how a mass workers’ party can be built on revolutionary principles, because along the way towards making international allies, Irvin Jim turned away consistently from any working-class alliances and met up with apostles of “multipolarity” and

“a new Bandung” such as Roy Singham. The Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party that arose from that encounter and which also brings in some independent “leftists” in South Africa has made zero impact on the masses in South Africa because it has done nothing to overcome the terrible political legacy of Stalinism. Nor have any of the petty-bourgeois socialists who have joined up with it themselves shaken that off, whatever label they identify with politically.

But Numsa members have refused to be limited by the bankrupt leadership of Irvin Jim. As these members of Numsa carry forward their recognised class interests as workers against the current Numsa leadership, they will need to enrich their activity with the theoretical lessons of those revolutionaries who opposed Stalinism at its origins and upheld real Leninism. The Left Opposition in the Communist Party of the USSR, together with its scattered supporters around the world, started the struggle to rescue the real party and international of Lenin. That struggle was later taken forward in the formation of the Fourth International. It is that international which must be rebuilt to that the working class can carry through to the end the struggle for a socialist society.

Bob Archer

9 October 2022

Appendix: The ANC and NUMSA

(from <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/formation-sanncanc>)

“The South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later known as the Africa National Congress (ANC) was founded on the 8 January 1912. At SANNC’s inaugural conference, Rev. John Dube was elected as its first president in absentia. The organisation developed out of a situation of racial exclusion and discrimination under the new Union of South Africa. SANNC aspired to unite Africans in the advancement of their political and socio-economic status. Contrary to its aim of unity amongst its African constituents, SANNC was restrictive and narrow in its membership. Participation was limited in accordance with class, gender and tribal status.”

The formation of the SANNC/ANC

Bloemfontein is the birth place of the SANNC, which became the ANC in 1923, one of the largest organizations in later years to struggle for freedom and justice in South Africa. Between 1908 and 1909, constitutional discussions towards Union took place which prompted numerous meetings organized by Africans, Coloureds and Indians to protest the Whites-only exclusivity of these constitutional discussions.

In 1909, a group of Black delegates from the four provinces attended the South African Native National Convention (SANNC) in Waaihoek, Bloemfontein, to propose ways of objecting to the draft South African Act, and the Union constitution. The SANNC meeting convened by John Dube and Dr Walter Rubusana decided to send a delegation to London to convince the British government not to accept the Union in its present form. The delegation led by former Prime Minister William Scheiner failed in its aims as White supremacy was entrenched under a unitary state.

On 8 January 1912, several hundred members of South Africa's educated elite met at Bloemfontein to establish a national organization to protest against racial discrimination and to appeal for equal treatment before the law. The group comprised of South Africa's most prominent Black citizens: professional men, businessmen, journalist, chieftans, ministers, teachers, clerks, building contractors and labour agents. This meeting was the most significant in the history of Black protest politics as it was the first joint meeting of Black representatives from all four self-governing British colonies and indicated that Blacks were capable of united action.

History of the African National Congress

Although it was not the first African political organization in South Africa, its formation marked a clear break from the past as the focus of Black politics previously centered on electoral activity in the Cape Colony where Blacks with the required property and educational qualifications could vote and stand for office.

Their voice in politics at the Cape was significant. At the turn of the century Black voters constituted nearly half the electorate in five

constituencies, which contributed to the belief that the most effective way of accelerating Black political advancement was to use their vote to influence the election men who would be sympathetic to Black aspirations. But the years succeeding the Peace of Vereeniging in 1902 witnessed the declining force of this argument. The founding of the SANNC marked the realization in middle-class Black circles of the contention that Black interest could best be promoted by action by Blacks themselves and not through sympathetic intermediaries.

Several reasons contributed to this change in opinion. Some members of the Black elite had hopes raised initially by the defeat of the Republics in the South African War and were bitterly disappointed. Despite expressions of imperial loyalty intermingled with polite phrased reproach at the prevalent discrimination against educated Black men with good character and ability, the British government made it clear that its paramount concern was White unity in South Africa.

Hopes that non-racial Cape franchise would be extended to the defeated republics were rapidly dashed as preparations for the Act of Union indicated that existing rights would not be respected in future. The Act removed the theoretical right of enfranchised Blacks to be elected to parliamentary seats which had existed in the Cape and also provided for the removal of the franchise from Black voters through a two-thirds majority vote of both houses of parliament in joint sessions.

By 1912, Black concern moved further than constitutional issues. The first post-Union administration, responding to the mining industry's labour demands and the disquiet of White farmers squeezed between capitalist agricultural companies on the one hand and competitive Black peasants on the other, moved swiftly to safeguard its position with these groups. Regulations were introduced, which made breaking a contract a criminal offence. Blacks were also excluded from skilled industrial jobs. The prohibition of rural land ownership by Blacks, or occupation outside the reserves dispossessed many landowners and leasing or tenant-farming relationships between Blacks and Whites were outlawed.

It was therefore made clear that there was more at stake here than just the interests of a small group who through their education at mission

stations had come to form an identifiable petty bourgeoisie. The Land Act of 1913 and its complementary labour legislation were the tools used to destroy a whole class of peasant producers, forcing them into already crowded reserves or driving them to seek work as farm labourers and mine workers, and later in the least skilled and most badly paid positions in urban industrial, municipal and domestic employment.

The group of men that assembled at Bloemfontein was well aware of the wider dimensions of the social tragedy being enacted around them. But their particular concern, the fear of any petty bourgeoisie at the time of crisis, was being thrust back into the ranks of the urban and rural poor. The main aim of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) was to represent the concerns and anxieties of the small professional middle class which was mainly responsible for convening the Bloemfontein meeting.

Its first President was John Dube; a Minister and school headmaster who studied in the USA and was strongly influenced by the American educator and activist Booker T Washington. Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a lawyer and prime mover in organizing the meeting to establish the Congress was appointed Treasurer. The position of Secretary General was occupied by Solomon T Plaatjie, a court translator, author and newspaper editor who had worked in Kimberly and Johannesburg. These men retained close ties with African aristocracy and the rural chieftaincy, who were conservatives concerned with protecting a moral and social order they correctly perceived to be under attack while at the same time being anxious to promote the general advancement of the Black race in South Africa.

The Congress intended to function as a national forum to discuss the issues which affected them and to act as an organized pressure group. They planned to agitate for changes through the following: peaceful propaganda, the election of Congress sympathizers to legislative bodies through protest and enquiries and finally through passive action or continued movement"

I am sending you this extract from the website "south African history online", in my opinion a very well researched website.

From it the class nature of the ANC was well established by 1912. Its impetus was the Failed expectations of in specific a tribal royalty. Its history until now simply echoes the basic principle that the class nature of an organisation cannot be changed except by total destruction.

The rise of the working-class mass struggles since 1971 in Namibia and since 1973 in South Africa uncovered the basic reactionary and anti-working-class nature of the tribal petit-bourgeoisie represented by organisations like the ANC and SWAPO. The self-organization of the working class was met with hostility, treachery, and violence. The SWAPO in 1971 distanced itself from the general strike in Namibia by publicly condemning its leaders as irresponsible elements. The emerging leadership of the working class were confronted with severe repression from the side of the South Africans and slander by the tribal nationalists. Since 1976 working class leaders that fled south Africa and Namibia were liquidated physically in exile. Inside South Africa the forms of liquidation were necklacing and summary execution facilitated by the South African state, the latter that operated its official liquidation.

The ANC and SWAPO were vehemently opposed to new working-class organisations that developed since 1976 and earlier. They slandered and ostracized the leaders as collaborators, agents and spies.

The Communist Party that developed out of a severely deformed working class, contradictory struggles, and the indelible influence of Soviet Stalinism became the transmission belt for liberal bourgeois politics into the mass struggles and sustaining the ANC and SWAPO.

The period after 1980 saw the replacement of the leadership of the working-class organisations with tribal nationalists especially in the trade union movement. That explains the rapid and frantic privatization after 1994.

A significant exception was NUMSA, a union of the industrial working class that was well outside the influence of the extremely primitive right wing tribal petit bourgeoisie.

The dichotomy in South African politics that arose after 1994 reflected in NUMSA and the ANC must be understood from the foregoing. The attempted

expulsion of NUMSA leaders can perhaps be explained by the strengthening of anti-working class policies by Chinese Stalinism. It is an attack against especially the industrial working class, but it is proof that organised working-class politics is still existing in South Africa. The SAFTU seems further proof of that.

The discussion and understanding needed is about Stalinism and its true class nature in relation to working-class politics in South Africa. It cannot be treated as an ideological current in the working class, but a reflection of degeneration and confusion. But, most seriously the expression of capitalist objectives and political destruction within the working-class movement. Its methodology needs to be dissected and understood as alien and against the methodology of Marxism.

Hewat Beukes

October 2022

Ukraine is a warning to workers everywhere

Comrade Leonardt, a trade-unionist and socialist in Namibia, asked a few days ago for an explanation for the crisis and war in Ukraine.

He speaks for millions of people all over the world, who have been increasingly horrified by the growing savagery of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is right to denounce this appalling brutality on the part of the Russian government and it is right, as many people are now doing, drop their daily routines and make a great effort to support the millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing their country.

But it is not enough. We have to do our best to understand the driving forces behind this crisis situation, which is a warning to everybody in

the world.

The mounting crisis points to a central feature of world politics, economy and diplomacy: the growing rivalry between the established “Western” (or “First World”, to use that repulsive and misleading term) powers and the rising economic, diplomatic and military powers of Russia and China.

Just over a month ago (January 31, 2022) these words were posted on the “LA Progressive” website:

“This moment in history will be remembered for the massive shift in global relations currently underway. On one side stand the forces of peace and multipolarity led by China, Russia and their allies in the Global South. On the other is the forces of empire and conquest spearheaded by the US and its allies. The conflict between these two camps is about much more than competing visions for planetary development. World politics has transitioned from a war between socialism and capitalism to a protracted struggle for the survival of humanity itself”.

(As the US threatens endless war with Russia over Ukraine, confidence in China surges, by Danny Haiphong).

The Russian invasion of independent sovereign Ukraine has literally dropped a bombshell into this type of wishful thinking. Millions of people around the world are deeply shocked and revolted by the cynicism, brutality and lies with which the Russian state has set about destroying an entire people.

Following immediately on the heels of the wordy joint declaration by President Xi (China) and President Putin (Russia) during the 2022 Winter Olympics, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has severely embarrassed the Chinese state. President Xi’s government urgently needs to distract world public attention from its own treatment of the Tibetan and Uighur peoples and to paint in the most appealing colours possible its seizure of Hong Kong, its intention to seize Taiwan, and its broader ambitions around the world, including the Belt and Road Initiative (“The New Silk Road”) to

extend Chinese trading, financial and diplomatic relations around the globe.

Where does Modern Imperialism Come From?

Danny Haiphong and those who think like him understand imperialism simplistically as “the forces of empire and conquest” and specifically identify this solely with “the US and its allies”, as if there had never been any other imperialists in modern times. On this point, as on others, Danny Haiphong is putting aside the discoveries of generations of socialist thinkers and activists who have probed beyond the appearance of “empire and conquest” to discern the social and economic driving forces of the phenomenon.

A good starting point is Chapter 31 of volume 1 of Karl Marx’s *Capital*, which locates the beginnings of “empire and conquest” in the “genesis of the industrial capitalist” in Europe, specifically in Britain. Moreover, a few pages later in his discussion of what colonialism reveals about the inner workings of capital, Marx explains the direction in which the laws of capitalist society push the whole system. He talks about:

“... the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production itself, by the centralisation of capital. One capitalist always kills many. Hand in hand with this centralisation, or this expropriation of many capitalists by few, develop, on an ever-extending scale, the co-operative form of the labour-process, the conscious technical development of science, the methodical cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labour into instruments of labour only usable in common, the economising of all means of production by their use as the means of production of combined, socialised labour, the entanglement of all people in the net of the world market, and with this, the International character of the capitalist regime”. (K.Marx, *Capital* vol 1, London 1974 pp 714-715.)

In the same passage, Marx explicitly talks about the way forward in:

“... the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the

mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself” until “the knell of capitalist private property sounds, the expropriators are expropriated”.

It was upon these conceptions that Lenin based his analysis of capitalism in its imperialist phase during World War I. His quite short and readable book, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, is essential reading for anyone who really wants to understand what is going on.

Imperialism is not the result of “bad” or “evil” people (although it certainly spawns monsters), but of the social relations of capitalism. By reproducing these contradictory relations on a world scale, imperialism ushers in not only constant rivalry and war, invasions and annexations, between imperialist powers and also against their victims, but also the epoch of world revolution of the working class to achieve socialism.

What is the “Global South”?

The “Global south” is a confusing euphemism for the huge territories exploited and oppressed in various ways by imperialism over many centuries and still today. The first point to make about these territories is that they have become part of “the entanglement of all people in the net of the world market” and “the international character of the world market”, albeit under very different conditions from those in the imperialist nations.

Imperialist nations (like the USA, UK, EU, Japan, Russia and China) certainly have “allies” in these parts, but these are either “compradors” (businesspeople who facilitate the exploitation of their compatriots by the imperialists) or outright corrupt puppets. There is no “third road” forward in these countries. Not one of them is going to find a peaceful way forward through a peaceful capitalist development. The end of imperialist exploitation can only come when masses of people join the “revolt of the working class” and fight to end the capitalist system. The very few polities that will be able to become imperialist powers themselves (as, for example, Germany and Japan did in the late 19th century, and Russia and China are doing now) will only be able to do so through brutal dictatorship and the ruthless exploitation of their own

people and the oppression of other peoples. The rulers of Myanmar present a good example of a bourgeoisie with that type of ambition.

What is Russia? What is China?

What can Russia and China now bring to the “global south”? These regimes (the Peoples Republic of China and until 1992 the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics) were the products of mass revolutions whose original inspiration was the insights of Marx and Lenin. But for decades their leaders have followed a “capitalist road”. The Chinese government maintains in words an appearance of socialism, and the country is still ruled by the Chinese Communist Party, which maintains a continuing but distant relationship with the actual ideas of Karl Marx. But 30 years ago, the Russian state, the USSR, simply collapsed.

The last “Communist” leaders, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, threw themselves upon the mercy of the “Western” imperialists. The USSR fell apart. Many national minorities had suffered grievously under Stalinist rule. This was particularly true of the peoples of the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) and of Ukraine, who demanded autonomy. (It should be remembered that there were also significant number of Russians living in these areas). The huge state-controlled industry and economy of the USSR was “privatised” under conditions which resembled piracy. Gorbachev and others promised Russian workers that they could join in a “common European home” and enjoy “western” standards of pay and conditions, but the reality was very different. Bandit Russian entrepreneurs fought like jackals with rapacious foreign “investors” over the corpse of the workers’ state. Living-standards plummeted as jobs disappeared and welfare and health services suffered. Life expectancy actually fell in the former USSR.

The “Pacific Rim” financial and monetary crisis of the late 1990s was a body-blow to the fledgling Russian stock market and banking system. The new Russian (bandit) capitalist class lacked the depth of experience and culture of rule of its foreign counterparts and was not able to deal with this situation. With the working class in disarray and leaderless, the only force which could restore a certain amount of order was the old security authorities of the former Soviet Union, and accordingly the kind

of electoral dictatorship which we see today was established around the person of what is increasingly looking like President-for-life Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Putin's state echoes the brutal barbarity of the Tsarist Empire. The President enjoys wide and unchallengeable powers. The electoral campaigns of opposition politicians encounter novel and inventive obstacles. Serious opponents are shot, poisoned and imprisoned. Personal freedom is curtailed by officially-imposed standards of conformity. Even slightly outrageous behaviour in public is viciously suppressed. The Russian Orthodox Church with all its taboos and prescriptions is the mentor of people's private lives as well as a source of nationalist fervour. Those like the "Pussy Riot" protestors who took pot-shots at both the patriarchal stupidity of the church and the stifling conformism of the government suffered appalling reprisals. Now, with the invasion of the Ukraine underway, thousands of anti-war demonstrators are brutally arrested and worse, and all independent media outlets are suppressed.

While retaining Communist Party rule, considerable state industries and above all state control of the country's main banking institutions, the People's Republic of China some fifty years ago chose a "capitalist road". US and other Western politicians were at bay against on the one hand a growing independence movement in their (official or unofficial) colonial dependencies and on the other a working class at home determined to preserve the gains it had made in the class struggle and press ahead to make more gains. This struggle of the working-class bit deeply into company profits, while body-bags coming back from Vietnam fuelled a national resistance to imperialist war. Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon looked around for allies – and found them in the Chinese Communist leadership.

The alliance with the Chinese and Russian leaders enabled the USA to broker "independence" deals in the colonies and semi-colonies which left the basic imperialist economic structures in place under new but pliant "liberation" leaders. It enabled the US, British and European capitalist classes to close down industry after industry at "home" and simply pull the rug out from under their "own" working classes, and it meant that the same capitalists could get their products made by Chinese labour in

Chinese factories and mines at a fraction of the cost of production “at home”.

By doing this, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have, over the last forty years, called into being two significant and numerous classes. The first is the now massive Chinese working class, by far the biggest contingent in the world proletariat. The second is the new Chinese entrepreneurial class, the bourgeoisie. For the moment, the CCP has been able to keep the lid on the class struggle between these two classes because for China the economic story of those forty years has been one of almost continuous and massive growth. However, that growth has now stalled. Meanwhile, Chinese businesses have become major players in technical advances and on stock markets around the world. On the other hand, China is now well on the way to projecting her economic power around the world.

No wonder President Xi has taken very public steps to punish high-level corruption, rein in the most powerful business leaders and reassure workers that the next ten years will see improvements in their living standards. “Communist” China has to face the implications of a domestic class struggle just like any nation with a largely capitalist economy dependent on world trade.

China’s Belt and Road initiative has organised logistical, commercial and political arrangements to facilitate the movement of strategic resources, food and raw materials into China and manufactured good out of China. Chinese loans are offered to struggling nations in order to provide the infrastructure that will underpin these arrangements. No doubt, given the moral character of many “liberation” governments, much of this “aid” is understood as a contribution to the President’s retirement fund, but it is still a debt which will have to be repaid one way or another.

When the Chinese state and businesses approach vulnerable foreign territories, their aim is to penetrate into new markets for their products, win new access to raw materials, or gain a strategic or logistical advantage. Like Portugal, Holland and Britain in previous centuries, China establishes trade routes, bases, harbours and transport links around the world as well as investing in foreign countries and

buying political influence.

Whatever “allies” China, and to a lesser extent, Russia, do have in these places are in many cases the corrupt and bankrupt local satraps of imperialism dressed up as “liberation” leaders. And China and Russia have played their part in corrupting them.

Many years ago, Russian politicians cut off military aid to the Cuban soldiers who were beating Apartheid South Africa’s forces in Angola. These Soviet politicians stood godfather to the puppet regimes which were established under the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and South-West Africa People’s Organisation (Swapo) in Namibia at the end of apartheid. Gross forms of discrimination were done away with, while imperialism kept its control of the mineral resources and industry. Poverty, unemployment and oppression is still the lot of the masses there.

After the negotiated withdrawal of the apartheid regime, it was Chinese politicians who persuaded Nelson Mandela to leave the mining industry in South Africa in the hands of capitalist monopolies. They told him that it would be a mistake to take the socialist road. What this meant became evident in 2012 with the massacre of 34 striking miners at the Lonmin owned Marikana platinum mine.

The Chinese government is fostering relationships with some of the most corrupt regimes in Africa, such as Namibia, where the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) in cahoots with the Swapo government has unlawfully sacked the committee members of the Mineworkers’ Union of Namibia at the Rössing uranium mine. Trade unions were organised in the mine in the days of apartheid in the face of the most evil forms of oppression and exploitation. Most of the labour force was made up of contract labourers provided and disciplined by tribal leaders. Workers endured appalling living and working conditions, but in the end – and with international working-class support – they achieved recognition for their trade union and much improved wages and conditions.

When CNNC bought the mine from Rio Tinto, promises were made that the union and its local executive would continue to be recognised and that

there would be no change in workers' terms and conditions. However, quite soon there were indeed attacks on workers' health provision and other issues and new middle-management were employed recruited from abroad. The company unilaterally imposed changes in workers' terms and conditions of employment against the wishes of the workers and their representatives. The local executive of the Mineworkers' Union of Namibia protested and its officers were unlawfully sacked. They are still in a battle to establish their legal rights to a labour court hearing and to get their jobs back.

The revelations of the "Fishrot" scandal in Namibia heavily implicate Swapo government figures. Foreign interests have bribed ministers and government official to grant fishing quotas above and beyond sustainable levels. The companies which own the fishing fleet have ridden roughshod over crew members' constitutionally-recognised trade union and health and safety rights. These crew-members, who went out on strike and maintained that strike for several years, were let down by a trade union dominated by Swapo politicians. They were denied access to justice by venal lawyers and corrupt judges.

Thanks to an agreement the government of the People's Republic of China reached with western imperialist powers during the 1970s, which developed into China's entry into the world market as a capitalist power herself, the country is now enjoying growing prestige and strength. However, it will inevitably become more and more deeply involved in rivalry and conflict with the established world power, the USA.

The Russian government's attitude to Ukraine very closely matches the attitude the British ruling class had for many years to Ireland. They thought that Ireland "belonged" to them and that it was part of Great Britain's "sphere of influence". It cost the Irish people a great deal of pain and effort to teach them otherwise.

To return to the *LA Progressive*: It is true that a "massive shift in global relations" is "currently underway". It is true that there is a "protracted struggle for the survival of humanity itself". But the points presented in between are a farrago of confusion and deception.

The “shift in global relations” is the emergence of China and Russia as claimants to the role of global imperialist hegemons, challenging the position that the USA has occupied since the mid-20th century.

To dress this “grab for world power” as inspired by “peace and multipolarity” is an enormous misrepresentation of the real world, a misrepresentation which is elaborated as the paragraph goes on. Danny Haiphong asserts that the conflict between socialism and capitalism is a thing of the past. This is the constant message of all enemies of the working class and the constant refrain of all apologists for capitalism. It is a message which disarms workers at the very point that they face the fight for a future.

For nearly two centuries, the movement of the working class to overcome capitalist social relations, which inherently involve oppression, exploitation, war and conquest, has made advances and it has suffered setbacks. The imperialist epoch concentrates all the tensions and contradictions of these social relations and creates the necessity and at the same time the possibility of a socialist revolution. The environmental damage caused by enslavement to the profit motive also makes this revolution essential if humanity is to have a future at all. The key issue is whether the force of progress, the working class, can develop the kind of leadership which can guide that revolution successfully.

Workers International to rebuild the fourth International will work loyally alongside all workers and groups of workers who set about resolving that crisis of leadership.

Bob Archer

10 March 2022

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 direct 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 serve 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 thought 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 health 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/”](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)

["https://www.ft.com/content/27cf0690-5c9d-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4"](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

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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

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 nauseum 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, Bolsonaro 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”](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, reduce 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*