

LEFT ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN SA SINCE 1994 AND APDUSA'S APPROACH TO ELECTORAL AND POLITICAL PROGRAMMATIC STRUGGLE

In 2023, one year before the 2024 national elections it again appears that voters, more specifically the labouring majority (workers and landless peasantry) will out of desperation vote for whoever is convincing enough and speak to their material interests most elaborately. The appeal and growing electoral support base of the Patriotic Alliance (PA) is a case in point. In other words, bourgeois electoral deceit and lies will again lie at the basis of the 2024 elections. Many have seen through and have experienced the bitter disappointment that is integral to the system; they are the ones who will abstain from voting or not even speak about/debate the politics that they are presented with.

In November 2021, 42.6 m people were eligible to vote but only 26.2 were registered voters. In the 2021 Local Government Elections held over the same period, 12.2 million people voted. This was the lowest voter turnout since the advent of democracy in SA.

At the level of public political representation, South Africa as well as many other countries are therefore in the midst of political crises. The very nature of crises demands that a resolution be sought. In our case, for the immediate future, it amounts to exposing the system for what it is and advance socialist ideas inside this decaying and wobbling capitalist order.

Characterizing the political landscape, we find corruption and political squabbling in and amongst workers' organisations e.g., trade unions. Left political leadership is sorely lacking. NGOs have become prominent in their endeavour to substitute progressive political organisation and socialist ideas in the social and political domain. The NGOs that employ pseudo radical ideas never explain that the organization act as a purveyor of ideas aimed at neutralising and deserting these same ideas once the election has run its course.

Multitudes of these structures exist today. They operate next to and in conjunction with civic bodies, trade unions, educational organisations and the like. They receive extensive media coverage and use elaborate language that is meant to explain the current situation and show a way forward. In the ranks of the ANC the centre cannot hold anymore. Its historical role of betrayal is culminating in its *de facto* disintegration. Not even their last bastion of hope, Cyril Ramaphosa with all his political acrobatics can save the proverbial dying horse. Only the bourgeois, mainstream media and its role as the leading party in government is keeping it afloat.

Benjamin Fogel refers to the rise in political backsliding, finding expression in the rise of "irrational passions such as nationalism, religious fundamentalism, xenophobia and racism lumped together under the unwieldy category of populism". People have been brought up in this tradition; presenting a left political alternative has to take close cognizance of these objective realities.

With this as background, we can consider the conditions under which left parties in SA, since the 1994 national elections until the last 2021 Local Government Elections (LGEs) found themselves in. We can look at particular instances of left electoral endeavours. Also, there were community/town/ward based civic or community forums that have participated in these elections. Another observation was the participation of groupings, communities, civic movements and independent candidates who entered as participants in LGEs.

Guiding questions to ask are (1) How did the parties and community organisations emerge? (2) How were they constituted and how did they organize themselves? (3) What was their theme or political alternative messages and manifestos? (4) Lastly, what were the electoral outcomes for these political entities?

1. Workers List Party (WLP)

During the first Bourgeois Democratic Elections in 1994, the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) entered into an alliance with the International Socialist Movement (ISM) to form the Workers List Party (WLP); to participate specifically in the first democratic general elections.

In their manifesto they mainly raised workers' issues and contributed to develop the consciousness of workers around socialism. These in general were the working conditions and poor wages of workers, unemployment, the issues of housing, education, health and transport. Socialism was presented as the alternative to capitalism.

The **WLP** criticized the ANC for raising unrealistic and unrealisable hopes under capitalism. The grand plan and object of WLP was to build a mass workers party.

The **WLP** managed to garner 4,169 votes which was 0.02% of all votes cast, falling far short of winning a seat in parliament. The contesting party became defunct at around 10 years post the 1994 elections.

2. Workers International Vanguard League (WIVL)

They contested the general election in 1994 in KwaZulu Natal and the Western Cape. In KZN they received 4,626 votes which was 0.13% of the total votes. In the W Cape they had 855 votes cast in favour of them which was 0.04% of the total vote in the WC. In the 1999 elections they had their last participation and could only reach 672 votes in the W Cape provincial vote tally.

3. Workers and Socialist Party (WASP)

In 2014, the next wave of political leftist organisations contested the elections. The Workers and Socialist Party **WASP** – previously called the Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT) (affiliated to the Committee for a Workers International (CWI) who operated within the ANC during the pre-democratic era. They had no illusions that the ANC will ever commit to a socialist programme. However, they were still clinging to the Freedom Charter of the ANC. They believed that the only way the demands in the Freedom Charter will ever be achieved was through a socialist revolution. Their open critique of the leadership led to the expulsion of four of their members in key positions in 1985 without any hearing.

In 1996 it reconstituted itself and became the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM). In 2012 they mooted the idea to form a new party of the working class with a socialist programme that would propagate the nationalization of the mines under the democratic control of the mineworkers. WASP was founded in 2013 and participated in the 2014 national elections.

In the elections they won 8,331 votes on the national ballot which can be translated into 0.05% of total votes cast, and a further 4,159 votes on the three provincial ballots contested.

Post 1994 elections the DSM proposed a re-organisation of WASP, as it concluded that it was complicated to continue with WASP as it was originally conceived, i.e., a broad umbrella body that could act as a pole of attraction uniting the forces that could build a mass workers party. They agreed on a unitary membership structure and a merger of the DSM with WASP on the basis of the DSM's political programme and organizing principles. When this was completed in 2015, the DSM name disappeared, and WASP became the face of CWI in SA. It is still campaigning for a new socialist mass workers party in SA.

4. The Makana Citizens Forum (MCF)

This is a civic group who contested the Makana Municipality election in Makhanda. It was formed as a result of the bankrupt municipality which faced collapsed under the ANC. MCF's core values of empathy, equality, fairness, care, respect, freedom, responsibility and solidarity formed the essence of its manifesto. The MCF incorporated the right to recall in its manifesto. It subsequently lost in all the 14 wards it put up candidates. The MCF did not propagate a left position in the election.

5. The Sol Plaatje Service Delivery Forum (SPSDF)

This party participated in the Kimberley Ward 1 By-election in February 2023. Here we had an independent standing who was a former ANC councillor. The individual gained 13% in the By-election held. A similar forum operated in NW Province. They essentially consist of individuals who peddle and recycle Congress ideas with a sprinkling of “people’s democracy” thrown in for good measure. The only thing independent of them, is the name of the individuals and their non-membership of the DA, ANC, EFF and the like. In some instances, these people present themselves as ‘non-political’ who say they are only interested in advancing the interests of the community. This is the level of political consciousness or rather, a lack thereof - to which many have been degraded to by the bureaucratic powers that be.

The forum increased its voter support from 1% to 2%. The obvious benefit of joining such forums is that broad layers of voters can be reached.

6. Socialist Revolutionary (SRWP)

The SRWP participated in the 2019 national election. Their manifesto was only released a few days before the election. What is the content of this document?

NUMSA's claimed membership of 400 000 did not vote for the SRWP. It is clear that the majority of their own membership on the factory floor did not vote for the SRWP and many stayed away from the polls. Those who voted, mostly did so for bourgeois parties. Very little campaigning was done: no media presence; no engagement with SAFTU unions' members. SAFTU did not endorse the SRWP claiming that the idea was never discussed with them. NUMSA could therefore not even imitate the bourgeoisie with the electioneering façade and farce that it essentially represent.

The SRWP was launched in April 2019. So, in the space of two full years it was unable to establish even basic infrastructure in the 9 provinces it was going to contest. If it did, then it was an unmitigated disaster. With Irvin Jim as chairperson, one can only speculate on how these Stalinists envisaged making themselves politically visible and relevant, as well as politically distinct from the SACP and the ANC. The low support they gained is perhaps explained by this association that workers made – consciously or subliminally. At no point was any invitation extended to other left organisations. We will conclude that factionalism and sectarianism are equal to political backwardness.

7. Eastern Cape Initiatives

In the EC there emerged several civic structures who registered to participate in the elections. They were of many hues. The NUMSA inspired United Front (UF) in Sterkspruit and in the NMM were two of those structures.

In one instance, e.g., the UF in Nelson Mandela Metropolitan (NMM) managed to win a seat with roundabout 3000 votes cast in its favour.

8. The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee

The case of Trevor Ngwane and the **Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee** is worthy to note. He, as a former ANC councillor stood as an independent and was elected to the council.

What are the lessons we can learn from all the above?

- 1 The alternative political message is paramount. We speak here of political differentiation, backed up by political/organizational praxis that reinforce these messages. By-elections afford a better opportunity to field a candidate. There is less political hysteria and hype involved. There will also be less high-profile electioneering happening. Therefore, more opportunity to convey left political ideas will be possible.
- 2 The need for left collaboration: in this regard we must revisit APDUSA's involvement in the APF and the RLN in the past. The periods of engagement were long. Our input and leadership in these forums should stand us in good stead to extract important lessons even though the political situation has changed since then. Many of the political groups who were then active has since gone aground. Or, they have deteriorated to the point of non-existence. Without the participation of a left caucus in broader forums, it will be difficult to raise the level of political consciousness, generally.
- 3 The involvement of the state, through legislation and its own agencies to discredit and make it, if not impossible, then extremely difficult for left organisations to participate.
- 4 Associating political ideas with a face that people can recognize and relate to is also critical. In this regard, building a social public profile for and of individuals is something that becomes part of an electioneering campaign. In this regard APDUSA's interaction and collaboration with people's organisations where we are present and active can be broadened to include consideration of engaging in electoral politics.
- 5 Sectarianism by leftist groups is an obvious problem in South Africa.

The problem with these 'popcorn' parties/groupings is that once they do not make electoral advances, they either disappear or tend to focus attention on service delivery only. The politics remain insular. No real intention exists to develop United Front (and other) structures into fighting organisations. In fact, this is consistent with the old Congress policy of wanting to control everything and stifling or suppressing independent voices. So, the

UF started out as a real alternative; a socialist inspired alternative. In the end, the SRWP after the 2019 debacle, did not participate in the 2021 LGEs! One would have thought that this could have afforded NUMSA and the SRWP to, via the UF structure, field many candidates across the country, together with other left forces to get progressives elected onto local councils. But, no. The SRWP instead went into hiding and we don't know what their position will be vis- a- vis the 2024 elections.

The NUMSA and SRWP also appear to adopt the attitude that if they are not fielding their own candidates then communities or civic structures should refrain from doing so.

We are saying that any of the leftist parties and civic organisations who want the support of the masses cannot impose their will on the people without engaging with them and do the hard work in the trenches with struggling workers and landless peasants. If the left would like to be successful in any future participatory parliamentarism then it will also have to open links with all progressive leftist organisations to form a principled and programmatic unity around the challenge.

Thank You

April 2023