

THE LEADERSHIP CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In its manifesto Apdusa calls “*for the self organisation and united independent struggle of the labouring classes. We believe that the struggle can only advance decisively via the greatest ideological and organizational unity between the workers in the urban centres and the peasants in the rural areas under the leadership of the working class.*”

The above statement presupposes that a leadership needs to be built that can give practical effect to the actualisation of the transitional demands that are current in the present time. These demands are contained in the 1995 statement of the organisation on “the struggle for socialist democracy continues”.

In reflecting on the above tasks and responsibilities we have set ourselves, it is perhaps useful to reflect on developments since the last general elections in 2004: i.e. on the developments that occurred insofar as leadership of society and of the working class in particular is concerned. There are developments that have crystallised to the point that they can be identified as telling factors in the matter of *leadership crises* we are witnessing at present.

The leadership of the ruling party and of government have basically sealed themselves off from the demands of the working class and peasantry. They continue to offer more of the same discredited policies and solutions they have since assuming political power. The remainder of the bourgeois parties have been displaying a mixture of the same political backwardness as the ANC: neo-liberalism dressed up as progress, ethnic politics, racialism, nepotism, political careerism and the like. Their hollow electioneering campaigns, based on empty promises testifies to all these. The tripartite alliance still claims to be the true representatives of the labouring classes in the country. The steady erosion of the popular support base of this alliance however points in the opposite direction. The emergence of the COPE has opened up debates and leadership contestation inside this alliance as well as in the broader political environment. Cosatu’s support for the ANC policies has come under scrutiny although the reactionary political orientation of the COPE leadership will not contribute anything by way of a progressive political alternative. This realignment in South African politics has opened up possibilities for the cultivation of progressive political inputs aimed at leadership development across a broad spectrum of society.

At the time of the 2004 elections the extent of public left presence was at a much lower level than at present. The emergence of the Operation Khanyisa Movement, an initiative that flowed from the Anti Privatistion Forum, the establishment of the Radical Left Network and the present existence of the Socialist Green Coalition, apart from the Social Movement Indaba which has been around for a longer time, indicates some measure of progress within a broad realignment in the ranks of the South African Left.

The coincidence of transitional demands contained in Apdusa’s programme and the election platform of the Socialist Green Coalition represents a step in the right direction. Both formations recognises that the universality of neoliberal barbarism requires progressive and revolutionary responses. These responses must in the final analysis hit at the basis of the capitalist-imperialist system. The operationalisation or implementation of these demands in concrete conditions of struggle is what should be a guiding political principle of the leadership of aforementioned organizations. The contents of these demands when being articulated, popularised and implemented hits at actions that the state is very well capable of acting on. It stands to reason that it will not do so without being forced to. It realises that acceding to legitimate demands of the labouring masses will merely encourage further agitation on even more radical demands. The ruling economic and political elite across the globe are hardly going to agree to demands of the multitude of poor and marginalised.

WHAT INFORMS THE GROWTH OF A LEFT LEADERSHIP?

At the present moment the loose association and alliances between and amongst left formations serves as a very necessary basis for something more substantive to be built. The level of disillusionment of many political activists in congress politics does however not automatically translate into support for a left alternative. The political ideological degradation in the congress ranks has polluted many activists' minds to the point that they'd rather opt for cheap populism than serious revolutionary politics. Clearly a more thorough understanding of the liberation struggle is what is required.

A major part of this understanding revolves around the operation of the ngo industry in South Africa. Here I refer to ngo's in general since some that we are familiar with would perhaps not fit the ideological straightjacket I place them in. [*The reference source is a range of articles taken from academic journals dealing with ngo's as a global phenomenon*]. A closer look at the political role they perform especially insofar as the impact they have on the emergence of a progressive left leadership in SA is considered necessary. If we are all agreed that we practice internal organisational democracy then this is patently not the case with Ngo's who operate in environments that provide them with relative immunity from transparency. It can and does happen that as the working class and peasantry lose trust in the government institutions they will come to rely on ngo's to advance social causes. Crises of political authority can be solved through the interventions of ngo's acting as substitutes. This is possible due to the sometimes substantial external sources of financial support they enjoy. This holds obvious implications for the "independent struggle of the labouring classes" referred to in the opening paragraph of this paper. The basic assertion is that if an ngo provides the infrastructure for say a rural developmental project, why should the community still be bothered to have their own independent local organisation?

Ngo's set or define agendas, they develop and promote codes of conduct/political behaviour . They gain official recognition reflective of their growing importance in solving serious or vexing problems. The case of the TAC in SA comes to mind. As 'gap-filling' organisations they gain influence through educational and training programmes that shape the political behaviour of those affected. Given the above , it follows that they tend to reduce or diminish the public accountability in any society they happen to be operating in. The net effect of ngo activity can be that the politics in a society becomes deradicalised; that society becomes depoliticised. Ngo's therefore play a conservative role by preserving class inequality, reducing pressures for radical reforms and fragmenting the struggles of the working class and peasantry. Services provided by ngo's often function as a stopgap measure substituting for more fundamental political demands being advanced. In this respect it is argued that they contribute to the paralysis of social and political action. They furthermore tend to oversimplify the issue of poverty as a pure economic problem. In this process the attention of the poor is diverted away from wider political questions. The position of Apdusa on this limitation of economic struggles has been stated repeatedly. The disempowerment of the working class and the peasantry , not only in the South African context alone, is associated with this phenomenon of the existence of a diverse and competing array of ngo's.

Part and parcel of this scheme of things is the phenomenon of 'independent socialists' who are essentially free floating agents of the revolution, providing input in struggles wherever and whenever they deem fit. The building of a working class leadership through organisation and the conquest of political power under the leadership of the working class is for them secondary political considerations. This façade they maintain in the face of highly organised capitalist state machinery presently engaging in forceful attacks of the very livelihood of hundreds of millions of workers and peasants the world over.

IMPACT ON AND OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM

For many decades isolated struggles has been a hallmark of South Africa resistance politics. Presently this approach is continued by two forces namely the ANC and ngo's respectively working or approaching the ongoing struggles in the same manner: as battles to be fought and settled individually. What has however also developed is that the severity of the economic and social crisis staring us in the face compels communities to start questioning both the legitimacy of the system and the nature of their political participation in this system. Many communities as part of social movements in the country hence opted to not participate in the 2009 national elections. If they are to act at all in a politically consistent manner then it would mean boycotting the 2011 local government elections as well. Some leadership figures argue that this is punishment for the treacherous top leadership of the ruling party. The irony is that community members by and large tend to remain members of the majority party. In some respects it comes across as a cop out ; of an inability to employ different political strategies and tactics as part of a social movement process whose aim it surely must be to seize the reins of political power in the interests of 'the people on the ground'. Anything less than this is tantamount to political deception of the highest order. People are simply being led into a cul de sac. This objectively speaking merely serves the interests of the ruling class: their political representatives will once again get elected while the working class will be on the outside looking in or simply being ignored ... again.

A FUTURE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE

In stating that the democratic aspirations of the workers and landless peasants shall be paramount Apdusa commits itself to seeking broader collaboration with likeminded forces aimed at forging ahead with the exploration of an organisational alternative for the working class and of the working class. Developments, specifically in Latin America serves as an added incentive for us to work even harder to get closer to that political objective.

Thank you

J Sauls
April 2009