

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE NECESSITY OF A PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL PROGRAMME

The history of human society is a history of struggle and conflict. It is a process of necessary struggle for social progress which has been and still is opposed by those elements in the human social fold who enjoy short-term benefits at the expense of the majority on the basis of historically well engineered vested interests. As we attempt to examine this crucial question we are only able to rely on recorded or transmitted history. In our own country it is at least simple to go back some 350 years when a new epoch opened up with the forcible introduction from Europe of the norms and requirements of the capitalist economic system and its concomitant demands on social organisation. What followed was the subjugation of millions of people, formerly organised according to different social and undeniably more primitive economic standards, to the diktats of a minority that drove the capitalist objective. For a long time it must have appeared to many that progress that could benefit society as a whole instead of just a minority was nothing but an idealistic chimera. But with time, through a complex process of retreats and advances, the myriad of separate, seemingly disparate struggles of the victims of this inequitable system eventually coalesced into a united struggle for emancipation in political terms.

The transformation of disparate economic and social reformist struggles into a struggle headed and driven by generalised political demands is no accident of history. It has been repeated in various forms the world over. Thus, it is generally accepted by those concerned about the enormous social problems that bedevil our society today, that radical change can only be achieved by political means. But the critical questions that are being debated afresh, despite the lessons and experiences of our own past and indeed the lessons and experiences of peoples across the world, is how in practice and organisation these political means are to be realised. If we look at the situation now it would appear that lessons of the past are not easily learnt. This is partly because new circumstances obscure the identity of current problems as ones that also existed in the past, a fact that is assiduously exploited by those with vested interests in the prevailing order.

At present we see struggles being waged on three important fronts, namely the struggle of workers as led by the trade union movement, the struggle around land redistribution and the struggle on the civic front. The class basis of these struggles is fairly obvious. We also observe a number of struggles on other fronts, i.e. single issue struggles such as the fight of the Treatment Action Campaign, the campaign for the abolition of the apartheid debt, struggles around various environmental questions, gender equality and gay & lesbian rights. These struggles do not have a clear cut class character. For instance, debt relief would have potential benefits for not just the exploited but the nationalist bourgeoisie as well, a fact which the imperialist credit masters are quick to emphasise – pointing at the corruption of ruling elites in the third world as an excuse for not granting it. Even the promoters of the anti-debt campaign do not discriminate too carefully on such matters in the formulation of their demands. Nevertheless these various struggles do impact on the class struggle when taken as a whole.

Besides this, we also have the ngos which have become a prominent factor in the social struggles of the day. While making due allowance for the role of the more radical ngos it is fair to say that in general the ngos incorporate a duality of objectives expressed by petit bourgeois sympathies for and considerations of an advantageous alliance with the oppressed and exploited, but funded by capital.

But let us return to the main struggles of the day. The struggle of the workers in the trade union movement is essentially a defensive one – a struggle to defend and protect worker rights that are ostensibly enshrined in the constitution and law. The most powerful federation, Cosatu, assiduously

maintains its alliance with the ANC and calls upon the workers to retain faith in its political leadership. No radical alternative is posed except for vague chants and slogans about an ill defined system of socialism. Reformist as it is, it must yet be seen as a struggle of the working class against capital.

The struggle on the agrarian front has made little headway, primarily because of the weakness of peasant organisation at the base. Attempts to build such organisation from the top down has yielded no significant results. The situation is not helped by the existence of different organisations competing on the same terrain without any fundamental difference in their objectives. We have a divided Landless People's Movement and Lamosa, with the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) also having entered the fray. The demands of each of these organisations are essentially reformist and they do not transcend the agrarian problem.

Likewise the civic struggles, which have emerged around the questions of essential social services, have made no significant gains in building national unity. In fact, we are witness to a recession from organised resistance to sporadic and isolated angry outbursts such as we have seen recently in Phomolong, Harrismith and Secunda.

What is glaringly obvious is that despite the experiences of the past these struggles are being conducted in isolation of one another and there is no clear move towards unity on a broader, political basis. We observe that the masses of oppressed and exploited workers and landless peasants react to the serious socio-economic problems facing them as a matter of sheer necessity. We can understand their failure to achieve unity in their various struggles when we take into account the serious obstacles that lie in their path – their lack of elementary economic resources, problems of communication and not least, the inability to identify seemingly disparate problems as having a common base. But there is no fundamental reason for the failure of the intelligentsia and socially conscious members of society to provide the necessary political leadership. The problem has indeed been addressed but the attempts at building unity on some kind of common basis have been tortuous and without much success to date. We only have to look at the very limited advances made by the Social Movement Indaba initiative to see this. Nor does it seem probable that significant success will be achieved in the short term.

There is an urgent necessity to examine the reasons for this failure and it soon becomes apparent that it is an ideological problem. This problem has many sources and I will mention a few of those more readily comprehensible to us. Firstly we have the betrayal of the ANC in the 1992 negotiated settlement and its role in government. Many of those who today actively oppose its policies were former adherents of the ANC. But they have been unable to see or accept that the present role of the ANC is a logical consequence of its program and policy in the past, even as it was inscribed in its glorified Freedom Charter. Even more so, that the organisational tactics and strategies that the ANC employed were specifically suited to its programme. These present day activists therefore believe that the ANC “only went wrong” after 1992 and its old tactics and strategies are legitimate in current struggles

Secondly we were witness to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the final recognition of the crimes of Stalinism. This has brought about disillusionment for many who saw the Soviet Union as the vanguard of international socialism. But it has also been interpreted by many in the ranks of the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia internationally as a signal of the falseness of the socialist objective. Which brings me to the next aspect of the ideological problem confronting us. Even as Jesus said that the poor will always be with us, so will we have the eternal ideology of petit-bourgeois reformism and opportunism polluting the struggles of the poor. But let us move on. What has resulted is the prominence of three political ideologies competing for leadership in the struggles of the exploited labouring masses. They are the ideologies of spontaneity, anarchism and radical reformism.

However much they appear to differ yet there is an unmistakeable unity between these ideologies. They all agree that political organisations can only play a secondary, supportive role in the spontaneous struggles of the oppressed and exploited masses. There are even political groupings that accept this as a matter of principle rather than a short term tactic. They agree that political organisations must be excluded from deciding on the direction and basis of struggle so as to protect the masses from bureaucracy and to safeguard the independence of their struggles against potential betrayal. While many speak of the need or desirability of socialism as an answer to society's problems it is hardly defined and remains in the realm of a promised land in the after life of present day society. Hence there is no essential difference between these and those who promote radical reformism – the radical limitation of the powers and authority of the giant business multinationals and the international institutions that serve them.

Others will say that they accept the necessity of a political program as a basis of unity and progress but then argue that this cannot be pre-determined and must emerge from the struggles of the masses or otherwise be introduced step by step at appropriate stages in these struggles - politically conscious groups or individuals essentially have the prime task of making their knowledge available to the masses and thereafter the masses must determine their own action. This conveniently overlooks the fact that if a member of an independent, initially non-political, working class organisation becomes imbued with a high level of working class consciousness then he in fact becomes a theoretician of sorts. This intellectual status immediately removes him from the ranks of the ordinary worker and he is then subject to all the potentialities of corruption as faced by the intelligentsia. This nullifies the argument for independent worker organisation that is only assisted but not led by the political intelligentsia.

We must further observe that these notions of spontaneity, anarchism and radical reformism are themselves political ideologies. Their proponents gratuitously obscure the fact that while they attempt to consign political organisations, with clear cut political programs to the rear, all they are doing is to seek means to advance their own political ideologies, while pretending to defend the spontaneous and independent demands of the masses.

At this point we need to observe that there is also an international dimension to the struggles of the labouring masses in our country which operates more strongly today than in the past. This dimension would appear to be secondary to the national class struggle as it is easy to see that our local workers, in strikes or the protesters demanding proper service delivery, have little notion of struggles taking place elsewhere in the world. Yet the impetus for unity in the international anti-capitalist movement is having a direct impact on struggles here with demands for organisation along lines tested elsewhere. This too, directly contradicts the idea of social movement spontaneity in ideological and organisational development. We can in fact note that amongst the ranks of those who argue for spontaneity we can find the very supporters of a South African Social Forum.

We therefore contend that the challenge to the role of political organisations is in fact an ideological stand against the shortest path to political unity of the struggle of the masses. We firstly reject any notion that the masses can reach revolutionary political consciousness independently. At the same time we observe that the masses are constantly subjected to a barrage of ideological propaganda justifying the exploitative conditions under which they exist. There is a fundamental necessity for such propaganda to be systematically countered with all possible vigour rather than waiting on the masses to come to an understanding on their own that they are victims of ideological indoctrination which limits the potential of their fight for equality.

In case it is thought that even in part this discussion is trivial, then it may be illuminating to look at the recent experiences of the people of Argentina. Argentina is a country with a population roughly equal to that of South Africa. It also has the natural resources and infrastructure for a potentially

powerful economy. As is happening today in South Africa under the GEAR economic policy of the ANC, the erstwhile leadership of Argentina subjected the country to an economic structural adjustment program as dictated by the IMF and World Bank. Then the economy ran into serious problems and the country was unable to pay its debts to foreign creditors. Inflation skyrocketed, factories were closed and the population was staring in the face of economic ruin. In response to this terrible crisis we saw the enormously significant rebellion of December 2001 which ejected President De la Rúa from power. In the wake of the economic collapse there was the exciting and inspiring emergence of the piqueteros, the barrios and worker takeover of abandoned factories. In other words there was a wide range of spontaneous self-organisation of the masses with real revolutionary potential to reshape Argentinean society completely in the interests of the labouring masses. But there was no centralised, revolutionary political leadership and no mass-based leftwing party to contest the elections that followed in mid 2002. The new president to be elected was Kirchner who has followed a bourgeois reformist path without making any fundamental change in favour of the masses. Without sound political leadership or a radical political program the organised rebellion went into decline and almost collapsed completely, with only a few militant pockets of piqueteros still holding the banner aloft. The liberation movement of the workers and peasants of Argentina now faces the task of having to go through the painful process of building itself anew.

By contrast, in Venezuela, a country with comparable problems to its neighbour on the South American continent, we saw the emergence of the popular political leadership of Hugo Chavez winning a parliamentary election. With a policy of participatory democracy and the promotion of Bolivarian circles – the organisation of the masses on the basis of a common program, the Chavez regime has survived by means of massive popular support, in spite of US backed coup attempts to remove him from power. The reforms in Venezuela have been more far reaching and radical than in Brazil for example, where a workers' party won political power. Today the eyes of people in struggle for justice and equality are turned to see what is happening in Venezuela. There is no guarantee that the new regime led by Chavez will succeed in the long run to ensure a better life to the ordinary working masses of Venezuela. But what is clear is that under the leadership of a political program that prioritises the interests of the masses the possibilities are wide open. In a very real sense the people of Venezuela have taken a bold step forward to meaningful socialism.

Returning to our own situation it should be clear that there is a need for unity in the struggles of the workers and landless peasantry - a unity in the struggles waged on the trade union front, on the agrarian front and in the civic movement. We can learn from our past that isolated struggles based on short term demands can bring only temporary relief, if successful, whereas failures in such struggles frequently lead to disillusionment. But this need not be the case if these struggles are united on a broader basis with more fundamental long term objectives. For then the results of short term battles could be assessed not on the basis of whether immediate demands had been won or not but rather on the basis of progress made in the long-term program of unity.

There is yet another lesson of the past that we need to be reminded of which is that the various socio-economic problems that confront the masses are not simply the result of errors, miscalculations or oversights of the government, but that they are the product of a system designed for a specific purpose. Therefore there cannot be any easy and lasting solution to any of these problems as they are not isolated from one another. On the same basis we argue that the many problems facing the labouring masses today are being generated by the present system under which they live and they are not just a legacy of the past that will disappear in time. The basis for unity of the workers in trade, industry and commerce, the workers and unemployed alike in their civic struggles and the peasants in their struggles for land, therefore has to be found in an understanding of the system that gives rise to their manifold problems.

This brings us to examine the much vaunted and glorified constitution of the Republic of South Africa. It is a very lengthy document containing many fine words and sentiments. I have no

intention, nor do I think it is necessary, to delve into its every detail. In any case, the constitution must be judged not only by what it says but also and just as much by what it does not say. What is of fundamental importance in the constitution is the property clause in section 25 of the bill of rights. Here we find the sanctification of private property subject to certain carefully defined conditions. We note that the constitution does not revoke the multitude of laws and legal precedents on the question of private property that are embedded in a legal system that has been inherited largely from capitalist Europe. This sanctification of private property lies at the base of how society is supposed to be governed and how social progress is supposed to occur. Briefly, it tells us to accept that the solution to all social problems is to be found in respecting the needs of the market. It means that social development lies in the hands of the business class and not the population as a whole. The government has the task of creating good conditions for business. It must employ methods to promote investment, savings and fiscal discipline, etc, etc, so that the business class can make profits, because no business is worthwhile unless it can make profit.

The constitution does not guarantee that the wealth and resources of the country shall firstly be employed to ensure the basic socio-economic needs of every citizen. Those who can only live by the sale of their labour power are not guaranteed the right to work. Instead the constitution guarantees them the right to look for employment in the trade of their choice. Those who would live off the land and whose forebears were dispossessed of their land are not guaranteed enough land on which they can earn a living. Laws based on our constitution subjects their needs to a very limited land reform program based in part on the notorious willing buyer, willing seller principle.

Every other basic human right proclaimed in the constitution is subject to the ability of the government to ensure it and this comes second to the task of the government to serve the capitalist market.

This is aptly summed up in the Apdusa manifesto: ***“the constitution, which prescribes the manner in which these political leaders may govern, embodies those principles which express the prerequisites for the viability of capitalism in South Africa. Most important of these is the entrenchment of existing property owning rights whereby a small minority owns 87% of the land together with the farms mines and factories on that land. This, in the face of millions of dispossessed peasants and propertyless workers who are thereby denied access to the land and the wealth of the nation. Alongside this we find the entrenchment of multi-nationalism and the outmoded, undemocratic institutions of chieftainship, tribal law and administration. This not only serves to divide people engaged in a common struggle for justice and equality but also cuts across the democratic rights of the majority. These constitutional principles were negotiated behind the backs of the people by the selfsame political leaders who now sit in power”.***

We are driven to the conclusion that there is a vital need for nothing less than a political program to serve as a basis of unity of the oppressed and exploited masses in their bitter daily struggles. This political program can moreover not emerge spontaneously from the ranks of the masses in their everyday struggles. It must be introduced by conscious students of history and social change because the most progressive ideas of our epoch are the product of a science and not spontaneous struggle or trial and error.

We in the Apdusa have formulated a program that we believe can answer this need and I quote the first four demands in our manifesto.

1. The convening of a democratically elected Constituent Assembly, charged with the task of drawing up a new constitution, governed by the interests of the oppressed and exploited working class and peasantry, based on the demand for full, unfettered political rights for all with majority rule in a unitary state, the removal of all artificially created regional political boundaries, the liquidation of all special minority rights and privileges which militate against the interests of the

majority. The Constituent Assembly must have full powers to discharge these duties, untrammelled by any directions and constraints designed to serve self-interested minorities.

2. A resolution of the land question in accordance with the needs of those who work and live off the land. This means the destruction of all existing tribal and feudal relations in the rural areas and the nationalisation of the land, without compensation. A new division of the land and its management, which excludes forced collectivisation, the payment of rent and the expropriation of small peasant farmers, must be undertaken by committees that are democratically elected by and answerable to the people.

3. The expropriation of all major industries, banks and institutions of credit and their management by the state and representatives of the workers in the interests of the population as a whole.

4. The revision of labour legislation for the liquidation of all discrimination against the worker. This also means:

(i) The right to work, which must be implemented both via the institution of necessary adjustments to the length of the working week to provide employment for all, without a reduction in wages, as well as by the institution of a progressive public works program with the full representation of the unemployed in its management.

(ii) The fixing of a living minimum wage as well as a sliding scale to compensate for any price increases.

(iii) The unconditional right to strike which includes the right of occupation of the workplace.

These are feasible demands which cannot be dismissed as pie in the sky. Let me use just one illustration. In our country today, amidst widespread poverty, joblessness and homelessness, we have a phenomenal proliferation of luxury holiday homes and estates across the country. When I say that they are holiday homes then I mean that they are overwhelmingly the second or third homes of a single owner. For most of the year these multi-roomed mansions stand empty. Increasingly they surround private golf courses that are extremely expensive to maintain, but such cost of luxury means nothing to the wealthy. Is it unreasonable that these luxury secondary homes which are only used occasionally should not be use to house the homeless? Can all these luxury golf courses not be put to other uses as productive farms making a livelihood possible for thousands upon thousand of the unemployed and landless? Who can say that that would be unjust?

Let me conclude by saying that we as Apdusa have the vital task to promote our program with all possible vigour because without a radical and progressive political program based on their fundamental interests, the struggle of the exploited labouring masses of our country is doomed to failure. Let us note that we as Apdusa, have gained one important vantage point for ourselves. Today as an organisation we have earned a position of respect not only here in South Africa but also abroad. It is ironic that this has happened now when we are but small in number compared to the large membership that was built up in the sixties. But we can claim that we have earned this position because of our consistency in supporting those revolutionary objectives that alone can solve the fundamental. problems of our society. We have also been scrupulous in our principled approach to struggle and no one can accuse us of being opportunists or popularity seekers. It is up to us to use this position in the best interests of the struggles of the workers and landless peasants to promote the unity of all radical political groupings that are in fundamental opposition to the system which seeks to consign the masses of our country to a position of permanent subjugation and exploitation.

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