

**APDUSA CONFERENCE  
JOHANNESBURG 5 MAY 2012**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

**THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE PRESENT**

With the achievement of the universal franchise it was logical for the masses to expect that the door to the road to emancipation had finally opened. They then placed their faith in the most prominent political parties. And though other parties and organisations had a more serious message about the difficult struggles that still lay ahead, these were perceived as not having enough power to influence developments and bring about the immediate changes that were felt necessary. The ideas of bourgeois democracy had come to the fore. Now, after eighteen years the people have been grievously disappointed and many feel betrayed. Yet, the vision of another world that is possible, which is completely different to the system in which we live, remains vague and is slow to take hold in mass consciousness. Thus, the working class and the peasantry continue to place their faith in the leading parliamentary parties, hoping that if they apply sufficient pressure by way of the continuous service delivery protests and trade union strikes, then the changes they sorely need and desire will eventually come about.

Now it may be asked why it is only now that parties on the left are openly speaking about an anti-capitalist or socialist solution to the problems facing society and why this idea was not vigorously propagated over a longer period of time, especially in the national liberatory phase of the struggle in the past. Surely then, the political consciousness of the labouring masses appeared to have been sharper than it is today. It should firstly be understood that in the days of this past period it was totally illegal to promote the ideas of socialism or communism. More importantly, people were denied basic bourgeois democratic rights which were reserved for the white population alone and the whites were seen to be enjoying many benefits and privileges from this selfsame system. It became necessary and indeed, it was logical that there should be a struggle for bourgeois democratic rights for all before one could ever think that the idea of socialism could have any real meaning for the people. While the Unity Movement was careful to teach people that bourgeois democratic rights was only a stepping stone to real emancipation and consistently taught that our struggle was part of an international movement, other political forces such as the ANC and PAC neglected this aspect and fought the struggle on a purely nationalist basis, that is, purely a struggle for bourgeois democratic rights in South Africa, quite apart from struggles elsewhere in the world. (It may be noted that at every conference of the Unity Movement or any one of its major affiliates, a paper dealing with the international situation was considered a necessary requirement.)

A national struggle in the colonial world can be progressive insofar as it is anti-imperialist or anti-colonialist and it has the potential therefore to move towards a united international struggle which would place it strongly on the road to socialist objectives. The struggle for socialism is indeed an international one, as distinct from other, former revolutions which were purely local or national. Indeed, all of the political struggles in Africa took on this anti-colonialist character and the OAU itself was initially an advance towards internationalism. But without a true and clear international perspective and an acceptance of what this entailed it was easy for the petit bourgeois leadership in these struggles to revert to the demand for national liberation or political independence as the only goal. This meant that these struggles were left wide open to compromise and imperialism was only too ready to take advantage of that situation. In fact, the self-justifying argument arose from the petit bourgeois nationalists that socialism was a European concept that did not fit the African situation and that an Africanist solution to the problem was the real one to be pursued.

While the struggle was faced with strong resistance and repression from the ruling classes in which

both the masses and the petit bourgeois leadership had to pay a heavy price, under these circumstances people retained their faith in the petit bourgeois leadership. They were inclined to believe that once they had won the franchise their emancipation would be more or less immediate and, in the same way that the Whites generally enjoyed superior benefits under the racial divide in apartheid South Africa, they too would now benefit from this expanded system of bourgeois democracy in which they would be included.

Today the Africanist idea persists. It is totally anachronistic and denies the fact that Africa is part of the world and Africans are part of the human race which has a universal heritage and not merely an African one. In human history significant advances were made at one time or another, by people all over the world. We have had the gains made by the people of Arabia, the Greeks and the Romans, the Egyptians, the cities of Timbuktu, Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe. We can add the advances of the Aztecs, Incas and Maya civilisations of South America, besides which we had the great Asian civilizations, such as those which gave birth to the city of Mohenjendaro in India and the Chinese dynasties which were so far ahead of so-called western civilisation at that stage. All of these and more contributed to human progress. We, in our corner of the world are certainly not a people apart from the human race and we, as all peoples across the world, can lay full claim to this universal heritage. Why should we as part of the human race, that migrated to and settled in every continent, cut ourselves off from the universal achievements to those in Africa alone? On top of it all we are asked to rationalise acceptance of the relative backwardness of African society which has been a particular historic condition of general development in a relatively short period of a few hundred years, but certainly not all of the time. This relative backwardness, compared to the highly industrialised countries of the world, still prevails today because of a multiplex of imperialist machinations and the trust in African tradition. We see that present day Africanism, in whatever form, is a narrow and reactionary ideology that stands in the way of the acceptance and adoption of internationalism which is a cornerstone of the ideology of socialism.

Today the situation has changed in many ways. Besides the evident failure of the ANC government to bring about any tangible benefits to the masses, many leftwing political groupings have been unable to muster significant support and consequently, have become weakened. This has reinforced the idea that it is only the major political parties in parliament that are capable of achieving anything meaningful. Partly, this has also led to a new notion, preached by many acting in the ranks of the masses, that we must strive to change the world without taking power.

Now this is an idea that has gained some currency on the international stage. It came to prominence with the birth of the World Social Forum, which opened up the scope for the argument that radical change can be brought about by non-political forces or what was presumed to be untainted people's power. We will bear in mind that the WSF barred political organisations from participating in its ranks and we have seen champions of this idea, such as Naomi Klein who has won great influence via her prolific writings, attacking and criticising the ills of unbridled capitalism. Persons such as her have also gone further to finance people's resistance in various parts of the world. This has contributed to what we call the NGO mentality and the "all expenses paid" form of resistance. Others on the international stage such as the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists preach a similar idea, arguing that you can have a socialist society without a political party in the leadership. They too have achieved prominence with notable exponents such as Noam Chomsky. The ideology of syndicalism, with its emphasis on trade union struggle to the neglect of any other kind of struggle, as well as anarchism, have existed from the birth of the socialist/communist movement. And now the two have been combined. We therefore have two not dissimilar notions: Radical reformism with no distinction between capitalism and socialism, in fact a denial of socialism, as evinced by Naomi Klein and others like her, and anarchism, which argues that it is possible to advance to and practice socialism without any leading political party. This is supposed to be an answer to Stalinist bureaucratism. Incidentally, it needs to be said that despite the perversion of the Russian Revolution in its socialist objective by Stalin, it is often conveniently overlooked that this

revolution destroyed monarchistic rule and the feudal order that it represented, which was and has remained a political advance for Russian society, which cannot be denied.

Returning to our theme, it is inevitable that these obstructionist ideas have flowed over into South Africa. We see them expressed in the voices emanating from the likes of Abahlali base Mjondolo and thus we have a potentially progressive movement of people being subverted. Then there is the renewed idea of anarchism which emerged in the Social Movements Indaba and is strongly prevalent in the environmental movement headed by NGOs. The main consequence is that the masses are taught that they cannot rely on any political body to lead them forward and this is taken further with the idea being preached that all political parties are inherently prone to corruption and self-interest. In effect the people are asked to believe that the struggle is not at all a political one. Most importantly, they are encouraged to follow the lead of the NGOs.

There is yet another problem that the revolutionary struggle faces and must overcome. This is the problem of political sectionalism or sectarianism displayed by various left-wing groups operating today. Lastly, there are those who display a dismal confusion of the real problems that we face. The incessant arguments of all of these, whether veiled or blatant, act so as to hamper the vital growth of political unity of the masses on the national front.

Time does not stand still, nor does history unfold mechanically. Today capitalism is in a serious crisis. We are faced with the problem of over-production and over-accumulation under the aegis of our capitalist rulers. Over-production means that too much goods are produced in key areas which the capitalist market cannot absorb. So you find that the cost of things such as television sets, cell phones, household appliances are continually dropping while the producers desperately try to attract rich buyers, scrapping the old and introducing their latest products. Hence, many products, produced with marketable intent, are consigned to the waste bin. This is typified by the downward slide of the once almighty Sony Corporation.

Over-accumulation, which is very much the same thing, means that profits have been made but there is no room in the market place for these profits to be re-invested so that they can earn more profits, which is the desire of every capitalist. The capitalist bosses thus enter the realm of gambling and speculation in the stock markets as a means of making some sort of use of their capital. Speculation is not at all productive. It only means that one capitalist attempts to win the profits of others that were indeed the result of useful production. But speculation has led to unbridled credit and at its opposite, unbridled debt. We are thus further faced with these problems of mountainous debts derived as a result of loans that could not possibly be repaid, and this condition cannot be resolved within the capitalist framework. This is not the whole story as the world is also confronted with the devastating and growing consequences of global warming and climate change and industrial pollution, which is largely a result of capitalist greed. Capitalism cannot and will not face up to this problem.

It is indeed a fact that over-production and over-accumulation are the main factors which lie beneath all the problems of capitalism today. Let us note that competition between capitalist enterprises accelerated the growth of new technologies and this had a dual effect. In the first place it reduced the dependency on general human labour and instead demanded the creation of a specialized labour force while the mass of the working class became faced with growing unemployment and/or lower wages for menial, repetitive work. In the second place, the glorious free market of capitalism became twisted to meet the needs and demands of those who could afford to pay. Consideration of the basic needs of the labouring masses was left further and further behind while production turned more and more to luxury goods that only the rich can afford. But the new technologies have also served to heighten the productivity of labour, until today, there is a surfeit or oversupply of luxury goods, which are alone considered profitable, while the production of food and housing for the poor, for example, is neglected because they do not have the money to pay.

It is in this situation that the bourgeois class turned to neo-liberalism as a possible solution to the problem. Firstly it meant exploiting labour at its cheapest cost anywhere in the world. Secondly, there has been the resort to the privatisation of those enterprises that were formally in the terrain of the state. In the past it was normal for the state to provide large scale services such as power, water, transport (roads, railways, bridges, ports and harbours), things that even the big capitalist corporation could hardly afford, but even if it could it was too concerned with exploiting opportunities in other lucrative private enterprises. This has only worsened the problem. As we have observed, with over-production, the last resort has been to speculation and gambling in the international financial markets. If you cannot find a market for goods that you could produce then you must resort to winning the profits of others by speculation on the stock market, without producing any wealth yourself. But the bubble has burst and in the face of this crisis there is a renewed attack on wages and living standards of the working class internationally. The capitalist class has also attempted in varying degrees to resort to measures predating neo-liberalism. So far there has been no real success in this endeavour and we await the full effects of the crisis which shows no signs of being resolved in the near future.

It is becoming clear that the only real and lasting solution to the crisis cannot be found in capitalism and an alternative is necessary. But, as noted earlier, this realisation is not yet fully in the consciousness of the masses. And as also noted previously, there are voices in the ranks of the oppressed and exploited who dictate that the masses should have no faith in any political organization as all political organisations or parties which achieve some measure of power become corrupt. Some expound this idea quite cynically while others genuinely believe that political organisations can only play a supporting role as they would inevitably tend to destructive bureaucracy which stifles the initiatives and revolutionary volition of the masses. Yet, we say that it is only via a political struggle that the masses can have any hope of a real advance in the battle to realize their economic needs.

We have recognised that a serious part of the problem is the fact that the new generations do not have a clear understanding of how the struggle shaped itself in the past. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding of the continuity of the struggle, as if we are fighting a new struggle today. Moreover they are being presented with a false and distorted version of our history, which suits the ruling class alone. Mistakes were made in our historic struggle but these by no means outweigh its positive gains. We have experienced twists and turns and intermittent periods of reaction. But overall, there has been a forward march in our history. The present is a product of the past.

Without a correct understanding of the past it is difficult for anyone to move towards full political consciousness. We must therefore press on with our programme even if we seem to be insignificant. Indeed, we are not. But in doing so we will face great odds. Happily, there are other forces in the field who are faced with the same problems which they see in more or less the same way as we do. It is necessary for us to reach out to these wherever and whenever possible so as to build an alliance of all leftwing forces. We have to face up to the fact that it is impossible for any one grouping to go it alone. This is a lesson that has been learnt by the radical left movement internationally and in the present a number of important attempts have been made in various countries to build unity of the masses on the basis of a broad anti-capitalist programme. We have the examples of the Communist Refoundation Party in Italy, the Communist Revolutionary League (LCR) in France followed by the New Anti-Capitalist Party. Then we have Die Linke or The Left Party in Germany and the effort to build a Socialist Alliance followed by similar effort with Respect, in England, to name but a few. Indeed there are a number of other such efforts as well. This struggle is not seen as an end in itself but as a necessary process through which the political consciousness of the masses can be elevated to the point where a clear-cut socialist programme can be advanced. These are struggles that we must learn from. While we presently hold on to our own perspective we must be open to learning valuable lessons from others when they are presented to us. This is the only way forward.

Lastly, I would like to say that we should observe the ruling African Nationalist Congress party is in a state of disarray, with at least three factions operating in its midst, even though some may overlap in their perspectives. Firstly there is the grouping that believes that they must be benefited and served first and foremost as supposed fighters for freedom in the past, before anyone else. This is typified by the now notorious statement: “I did not struggle to be poor”. The use of the state machinery, which amounts to blatant corruption, is seen as legitimate in this cause. Secondly, we have the Africanists cum tribalists who can only think in terms of backward and outmoded solutions to the nation’s problems. Then thirdly, we have those who still believe that they have some moral obligation to progressively improve the lot of the masses, despite the fact that they willingly compromised these ideas in the negotiated settlement.

The idea that the ANC is indomitable and that it can rule until the second coming of Jesus is starting to wear very thin. In the forthcoming ANC conference we will see a right-royal battle for control of the organisation taking place. A Zuma presidency remains the easiest compromise. This would mean a continued toleration of corruption as has been the case with the appointment and defence of Simelane, Jimmy Manyi, Mdluli and we go on adding to the list. At the same time there will be forced action against blatant, criminal corruption when it can no longer be defended, and then this will be posed as the ruling party’s commitment to honest rule. It is doubtful whether the protagonists of blatant corruption can win a commanding position in the ANC and the action against Malema, finally taken, affirms this. But should the moderate moralists defeat Zuma and we have a Rhamaphosa or a Motlante as president, we should not be beguiled into thinking that the ruling party has turned over a new leaf. The conflicting factions will remain, all trying, with all the might that can be commanded to advance their aims. The fundamental problem of the incapability of the ANC to lead South African society forward remains.

Now although its general direction can be foreseen, history does not move in a way that anyone of us expects at any time. We have seen examples in Venezuela and Latin America generally and the Arab Spring in so many North African and Arabian states. So here in South Africa, with the ANC in disarray, unable to meet the expectations of the masses and without a tangible parliamentary challenge from any alternate bourgeois party in the offing, we must expect the unexpected. When it happens we have to learn to adapt to the new circumstances very quickly so that we can give guidance to the struggle and minimise the forces of superficial political reform and corruption that will inevitably arise. We live in an exciting time in which capitalism is fast reaching the end of its historic road. It is a time of world revolution. We, with some political consciousness of what problems the human race is confronted with today and where it is in its development, have to look to what role we have to play. We cannot betray the knowledge that we have. How would it be to future generations if they looked back and asked why those, who knew what was required, failed to act upon that understanding? In our own small way, which may become far more significant, we have a contribution to make towards progress and history.

.....