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# CRISIS OF POLITICS SEMINAR

2 – 3 DECEMBER 2016, AIDC SOLIDARITY CENTRE

## INTRODUCTION

The AIDC is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. At the same time, it is the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the launching of the Amandla media project. To commemorate AIDC's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Amandla's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary we will host a seminar on the crisis of politics. This is a forerunner of an international conference we will host in collaboration with our Transnational Institute friends in March 2017 on the same theme.

Our seminar over 2 – 3 December will bring together mostly South African activists and activist scholars to discuss the impasse in emancipatory politics at the level of vision, strategy and organization. Enlarging our frame of analysis will be the input of several Latin Americans, Africans and others from around the world who will input into the seminar from their particular vantage points.

The background and context to the seminar is the deepening political crisis, which we are experiencing in SA as a crisis of crony capitalism, inequality and mass unemployment, and which has precipitated the unravelling of the 1994 historic compromise. While the political crisis in South Africa has very specific features and dimensions, nevertheless, by reflecting on other experiences, we will lay the basis for a more generalized analysis of the global political crisis and the crisis of emancipatory politics.

The aim of this seminar is not to bemoan the current situation but to analyze the causes of the crisis of politics as a step towards laying the basis for generating a new, open, radical and emancipatory politics.

## CRISIS OF POLITICS

The crisis of politics has its roots in the profound changes that have taken place within the capitalist system. Neoliberalism, the globalisation and financialisation of the global economy, together with a changing global division of labour, have shaped a new geo-political balance of forces redefining both opportunities and challenges for radical transformation. The multiple nature of the global crisis, being at once an economic, ecological, energy and food crisis as well as being civilizational in its dimension, has given rise to new struggles and new agencies. It goes beyond the "working class", understood as blue collar workers. The crises intersect and reinforce each other and redefine the role of the nation state. Of course they remould social classes, pauperising and marginalising some, while elevating and co-opting others. They also profoundly redefine questions of identity and culture. Mass unemployment, precarious forms of labour and reduction of the weight of the industrial proletariat in

the context of globalisation redefine urban and rural spaces, restructure the reproductive role of women and bring into sharp relief our environment and the human species' relation to the biosphere and nature in general.

Hence, emancipatory projects are confronted with a series of new questions to which there are few clear cut answers and certainties. Traversing these challenges, while at the same time building a new political project in a divided and polarised society like South Africa, which itself has undergone dramatic change, is difficult. Doing so in a context of fragmented isolation, with little dialogue and interaction between different currents, will, at the very least require time and attention to intellectual work. The depth of the crises we face makes everything urgent and undermines the time needed for theoretical and intellectual work. This in part constitutes a significant element of what we refer to as the crisis of politics.

Furthermore, the crisis of politics refers to how the solutions (left political programmes) hardly match the changed realities we face. Clearly the power of globalised finance capital, and its capacity to disrupt national economies, makes taking power and implementing radical reforms very difficult, outside of a generalised confrontation with capital nationally, regionally and globally. The asymmetry of the military power of imperialism makes such confrontations look like suicide missions. If you are Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Greece under Syriza, you are caught in a catch 22 situation – doomed if you do and damned if you don't. The crisis of politics in this context also refers to how mainstream politics has become a case of Tweedledee and Tweedledum, different versions of a set of neoliberal policies, applied either less or more harshly.

## **SOUTH AFRICA'S POLITICAL CRISIS**

The global economic crisis that broke out at the very time Zuma assumed leadership of the ANC further limited the space for a more radical redistributive agenda. With a shrinking economy and plummeting share values, the 'new' bourgeoisie became more desperate to get their hands on state institutions as a means of acquiring greater economic opportunity. With Zuma's Presidency, there arose not just an alarming increase in cronyism and corruption, but also the flaunting of any respect for the rule of law and for the Constitution. As long as the gravy could continue to flow to lower echelons of the Party this did not overly concern the ANC leadership. What had to be managed was the dispensing of patronage to keep different factions satisfied. The arrival of the Guptas destabilised the processes of patronage and consolidated a powerful faction around Zuma at the expense of other groupings. Importantly, bourgeois forces less dependent on the state for patronage, such as Ramaphosa, Siphos Pityana and Patrice Motsepe, with closer ties to big capital, became increasingly estranged from the crass and crude looting undertaken by the Zuptas. The firing of a Finance Minister such as Nhlanhla Nene, well respected by the 'markets' (investors), had destabilised the economy and more particularly the markets. One can imagine how those in government less linked to the predatory elite felt alienated by the actions of Zuma and the cabal around him, especially as they had to deal with

approaches from big business, warning of the financial turbulence if Nene's firing was not reversed.

## **SA IN THE GLOBAL CRISIS**

It is worth reminding ourselves of the wider frame in which the economic and political crisis in SA is playing out. The global crisis, and specifically the global economic crisis, is shaping the form and tempo of SA's crisis. While there are significant internal factors that help us understand SA's unemployment crisis, we cannot fully understand the jobs bloodbath without taking into account the global situation.

Our seminar takes place as commentators warn of a new global slump. At the beginning of this year, Royal Bank of Scotland predicted a "cataclysmic year" for the world economy. Talk of a recovery and a new cycle of growth has come to naught. The contagion flowing from the Italian banking crisis has been surpassed by the possible collapse of Deutsche Bank, Germany's biggest lender, which could trigger a European wide financial crash. Germany faces its own "Lehman moment". A recent report from the OECD warns that the world economy "remained in a low-growth trap with persistent growth disappointments weighing on growth expectations and feeding back into weak trade, investment, productivity and wages."

What makes the prospect of a new slump so threatening is that the world economy is far from resolving the problems that contributed to the Great Recession: overcapacity in industry is resulting in declining profits, threatening insolvency, and forcing corporations to service unprecedented levels of debt in relation to economic output. The slowdown in the Chinese economy, which was considered as the one economy able to stave off a global recession, further exacerbates the woes of the global economy and suggests real prospects for a new global slump.

Stagnation in the main centres of the world economy, especially amongst South Africa's major trading partners, followed by the negative effects of Britain's exit from the European Union (BREXIT), has serious implications for the limping South African economy, which is already in recessionary mode. The current stagnation and potential new global recession would further decimate jobs in a situation in which mass unemployment is destroying the social fabric of working class communities.

The deteriorating state of the economy has to be assessed in relation to a possible downgrade of SA's sovereign debt, which may or may not materialise in November, when the main rating agencies are due to release their reports. With SA's external debt growing rapidly and reaching 43,6% of GDP, a downgrade could give rise to a massive outflow of capital, loss of value of the Rand and the need for an emergency IMF loan to avoid a debt default. If GEAR was disastrous for SA, one can just imagine the impact of an IMF structural adjustment programme.

## **Where is the left?**

In this nightmarish scenario, one has to ask where is the left to assist working class movements and communities in resisting the attacks. Even before an IMF loan or bailout, the government is already contemplating far-reaching reforms of labour laws, deeper austerity and even the privatisation of several state enterprises that are currently in crisis.

## THE CRISIS OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Almost three years after the NUMSA Special National Congress, we have to acknowledge that it promised much but has delivered very little. It has failed to regroup a significant part of the trade union movement and, perhaps more importantly, has also failed to develop a project of a new labour movement capable of engaging with the jobs crisis, with corrupting bureaucracies financed often by trade union investment companies, and with an increasingly informalised workforce; a renewed movement which puts democracy and worker control at its centre .

It would seem that NUMSA's strong orientation to political projects such as building a Marxist-Leninist Vanguard Party and the United Front, especially after the United Front participated in electoral politics, has chased some of its initial allies with strong ANC leanings back into COSATU and frightened NACTU. It is important to note that the whole process towards building a new federation has been a top-down process, with very limited involvement and discussion amongst shop stewards and rank and file members of participating unions.

What is clear is that neither COSATU, NUMSA and allies, nor any other trade union centre has the capacity to mobilise and build campaigns that go beyond immediate wages and working conditions. There is a sense of strong disillusionment and low levels of consciousness amongst the vast majority of union members. Trade union membership starts to resemble an insurance measure more than an identification with activism in a movement. The majority of union leadership has overseen a long process of depoliticisation as they sacrificed the labour movement's independence in order to serve as a transmission belt for a political project that held very few benefits for its members. The "Numsa moment" has become characterised by increasingly abstract and formulaic "revolutionary" rhetoric from the leadership in the face of a passive and unengaged membership.

What is emerging in the process of building and rebuilding the labour movement is how deep is the rot in the trade union movement and just how far the level of bureaucratisation has gone in killing off processes of self-organisation and activism. It is as if basic organisational tasks cannot be undertaken except by full-time, paid officials. A massive indictment of those initiating the process of building a new trade union federation is their incapacity to build a campaign to deal with the new wave of retrenchments in the mining, manufacturing and other industrial sectors of the economy. Deep levels of mistrust amongst different union leaderships will mean that a united response to reforms of the labour market and restrictions on the right to strike will probably not occur.

## FEMINIST DEFICIT

Mass unemployment and deepening levels of inequality have spawned a social crisis of such a profound level that the social fabric in working class communities is eroding. The greatest burden, as is normally the case in patriarchal societies, is borne by women. As services collapse under budget cuts, especially healthcare, child care and care for the aged, women are made to be the core providers and care givers. It is their unpaid labour that the state and capital exploit.

It is not just the intensification of the greater levels that women must play in providing care at a household and community level. It is also the war on women and their bodies that has intensified. Under the conditions of the economic crisis, and as capitalism attempts to commodify all aspects of life, the resulting alienation is directed at the vulnerable. Traditional gender roles come under pressure.

Working class men, discarded from the workplace, losing their 'value' to society as the main providers, often direct their anger within the family and within working class communities. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, hate crimes against LGBTI people become endemic.

As the oppression and marginalisation of women deepens and sexism seeps into all aspects of life, it is telling just how weakened the feminist movement has become. The women's movement and feminism have never been seen as a powerful component of the liberation movement, in fact they have been marginalised by the very liberation movement. This was because of the deeply gendered nature of capitalist relations that depended on women's social reproduction to sustain cheap migrant labour, as well as the critical role of patriarchy in communal forms of organisation. Not surprisingly, though the national liberation movement recognised the specificity of women's oppression, it played mostly lip service to feminist analysis and reproduced within the movement the patriarchal and sexist norms dominant in society. The post 1994 state-created gender machinery, precisely because it was imposed from above, has had almost no impact in altering power relations between women and men. In fact, we have to admit that 20 odd years after the ending of Apartheid, women's oppression is as severe and feminism is even more neglected as a mode of analysis and basis for movement building.

It is with the rise of the student movement, and with it the emergence of intersectionality as an important means of analysis, that feminist forms of analysis have regained greater currency. It is remarkable how in a short space of time these student activists have given birth to a new black feminism that is at the forefront of challenging patriarchal, misogynistic, sexist and heteronormative practices within our movements and reimagining feminist inspired emancipatory visions. These have yet to shape the perspectives of the political left.

## POLITICAL LEFT

The Movement for Socialism and the United Front are largely still-born and have little traction beyond the inner NUMSA leadership. The Movement for Socialism, which started off as a broad left regroupment project, quickly evolved to become a narrow project developed around a neo-stalinist party-building strategy designed to be a radicalised version of the SACP, from which the current NUMSA leadership comes. The idea of regrouping militants to “explore the building” of a pluralist new left project that would be responsive to the challenges posed by globalised capitalism has been aborted. In its stead we have a top-down dogmatic and narrow party-building project. It is extremely unlikely that this project can draw towards it a still significant number of anti-capitalist activists and intellectuals who are looking for a space and a place to make radical politics.

In this regard the United Front showed more promise as more open, broad left initiative. In its first meetings it was able to draw a very wide-range of movements and activists together around an activist-oriented initiative focusing on building campaigns and solidarity with a range of issues. However, the UF was crippled by lack of funding and resources that prevented it from developing greater levels of coherence on its nature, role and strategy.

One of the major weaknesses of the United Front was definition. Was it a campaign to fight neoliberalism or a popular political movement to challenge capital and the state and stand in elections? The issue of the local government elections became a source of division inside the UF. While at a national level the UF resolved not to participate in the local government elections, several regions and affiliates, including NUMSA, chose to ignore this decision.

The failure of the United Front reflects a weakness of popular movements in general. While it is difficult to identify all the factors behind the level of weak organisation, the depth of the social crisis and the collapse of the social fabric in working class communities under the weight of mass unemployment have to be taken into account. Over the last period, what we notice is that different struggles and movements have given rise to organic leaders, but rather than a process of “primitive accumulation of cadres” that serve as a network to build solidarity within and between struggles and campaigns, we have seen a process of dispersing and collapse.

## THE QUESTION OF STRATEGY

Many on the left were optimistic that the rupturing of ANC hegemony would open space for new left projects and threw their support behind various initiatives to build movements and alliances that would build and promote an anti-capitalist alternative. In this regard, the emergence of AMCU as a key movement pursuing a wage-led development path was significant. As were attempts at forming a new “independent, democratic and militant” trade union movement. Similarly, great possibilities were seen with the formation of the United Front for the building of a broad movement against neoliberalism. The progressive role of the EFF as the only left-wing party in

Parliament had to be acknowledged. Equally encouraging was the emergence of Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must fall as expressions of a renewal of a militant student movement, with huge potential for building powerful alliances with workers and poor communities and, importantly for any left movement strategy, regenerating a progressive intelligentsia.

From a strategic point of view, bringing these forces together in a political front held great possibilities for deepening resistance to capital and the neoliberal state. We are of the view that while this was a real possibility at the time, this is no longer likely to materialise. The moment has been lost for the near future. Perhaps, those of us who held out the possibility of creating a broad, pluralist and radical political front were too myopic and too optimistic about the possibility of bringing together different movements and forces which are at different stages of development, have different ideologies and political backgrounds and experiences. We underestimated the level of sectarianism and dogmatism that characterises resistance forces in SA.

In this difficult situation it is necessary to facilitate discussions amongst committed activists on rebuilding an emancipatory politics and the strategies needed for mobilising society behind such a vision that take into account the current balance of forces as well as the socio-cultural conditions that shape consciousness and the terrain in which radical perspectives must be rooted.

## THE PROGRAMME

The programme of our seminar will be built around the following themes:

- 1 Contextualising the crisis of emancipatory politics: the search for a utopian vision
- 1 The crisis of politics: lessons and insights from Latin America and Africa;
- 2 Critical aspects of a new, emancipatory politics;
- 3 The crisis of trade unionism and the problem of bureaucratisation
- 4 Strategies towards regrouping the left, the question of organisation;