

IZWI

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BUILD FOR THE WORKING CLASS SUMMIT

SEPTEMBER 2021



IMPLEMENT THE WORKERS PARTY RESOLUTION!

2 EDITORIAL

CAMPAIGN FOR THE WORKING CLASS SUMMIT TO BE A GENUINE PARLIAMENT OF THE WORKING CLASS!

UNITE ALL STRUGGLES AROUND LAUNCH DATE FOR THE WORKERS PARTY

On the Heritage Day weekend,* nearly three years since it first met, the Working Class Summit (WCS) will reconvene. This has the potential to be an enormous step-forward for the working class, one for which the MWP has campaigned for more than two years.

The South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu) convened the original WCS in July 2018. 1,000 delegates attended representing 147 working class organisations drawn from trade unions, other worker campaigns, community groups and youth structures. At the time we described this gathering as “an historic step forward”.

As the WCS summit recorded, a clear position was taken. The summit report read: “A clear majority agreed on a need to build an independent, democratic and revolutionary working-class political party, which will be strong enough to conquer social, economic and political power, abolish the capitalist system and replace it with socialism.” The re-convening of the Summit will finally allow the implementation of this resolution to go ahead.

This could not be more timely. The re-convened Summit will take place against the background of a world transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The disruption of the lockdowns has accelerated South Africa’s economic crisis. The ANC government’s solution to the 2020 7% economic contraction, sky-rocketing unemployment and growing poverty, is to try and stave off the country’s looming sovereign-debt crisis by piling more misery on the working class with a massive intensification of austerity. Public-sector workers pay is being frozen and service delivery budgets slashed. Reflecting the sharpening of the class struggle all of this poses, the capitalist state’s judicial-wing is increasingly stripping itself of the mask of ‘impartiality’. The Labour Appeal Court declared the 2018 public-sector wage agreement, not only illegal but unconstitutional! (See p. 10-11)

At the same time the main parties of capital are in disarray (see p. 6-7). The ANC’s factional divisions have become more inflamed. Zuma faces possible imprisonment; its NEC under pressure to enforce the ‘step-aside’ rule against its corruption-charged general secretary Ace Magashule. The DA’s racial tensions threaten to drain away its small black electoral support as it simultaneously bleeds votes to the right. Despite its increased 2019 vote, the EFF’s momentum has stalled. The likely prosecutions on VBS and On-Point Engineering will place unbearable strains on its leadership. This is why its commander-in-chief’s “tea party” with Zuma signals an auctioning off his party to the highest bidder between the ANC’s factions. For the first time since 1994, less than half of eligible voters voted in 2019. The working class sent a clear message with that abstention: **We are politically disenfranchised! None of the parties in parliament represent our interests.**

The danger is that if the vacuum is not filled by a workers party, reactionary formations will step in, stirring xenophobia,

racism, tribalism and criminality. On the other hand, as DA leader Steenhuisen’s declaration of support for Ramaphosa shows, the capitalist class will attempt to put together a new pro-capitalist coalition should the ANC split. This underlines the urgency of the workers party’s creation.

Delay

The MWP has regularly analysed the factional divisions within Saftu, including in a detailed Open Letter (August 2020 – available on our website). Saftu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi’s March ‘no-holds barred’ letter to Saftu affiliate’s general secretaries confirmed our analysis. In it comrade Vavi identifies “proponents of ‘RET’” (Radical Economic Transformation) – the corrupt Zuma/Magashule ANC faction (see p. 6-7) as responsible for paralysing the federation.

The Stalinist distortion of Marxism that guides the faction around Numsa general secretary Irvin Jim, which we describe as the SACP 2.0-grouping, is fully compatible with the RET programme. Stalinism divides the socialist revolution into two distinct “stages” – a democratic capitalist ‘first stage’ we are currently passing through, and a socialist ‘second stage’ to begin at some unspecified future date. This is fully compatible with the development of the new black capitalist elite whose interests (against ‘white monopoly capital’) RET promotes.

The nearly three-year delay in re-convening the WCS and the de facto suspension of the process towards it, resulted from divisions within the Saftu leadership. The SACP 2.0 grouping attempted to collapse the original WCS. They sabotaged mobilisations for the 7 October and 24 February Section 77 ‘general’ strikes and attempted to undemocratically impose their own creation, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP). This amounts to strike breaking. Attempts to block the establishment of the workers party serves the interests of both ANC factions. With their fortunes tied to the preservation of capitalism, both fear an independent working class organised in its own party armed with a socialist programme.

The MWP believes that the majority of the SRWP membership was misled into believing that it was established and endorsed by Saftu’s WCS. They did not realise its establishment was not intended to pave the way towards a workers party but to obstruct it; not to unite but to divide the working class. Behind the radical socialist rhetoric, the SRWP stands fully on the Stalinist ‘stages’ programme. It therefore acts as a platform for the interests of the aspirant black capitalist class within the workers movement. A workers party would not support a programme to replace exploitation by so-called white monopoly capital with exploitation by black capitalists. We call upon members of the SRWP to confront these facts and recognise their “vanguard” party is in fact a sectarian one. Heed the yearning for workers unity comrades, and throw your full weight behind the WCS process to establish a mass workers party on a socialist programme.

*CORRECTION: An earlier version of Izwi No. 3 reported 10 & 11 May as the date for the re-convened WCS. The organisers later pushed-back the date.

Composition

The reconvening of the summit is a victory over the SACP 2.0-grouping. But only the determination to emerge from this summit with an unambiguous commitment to establish a mass workers party on a socialist programme can consolidate that victory. Therefore, the question of the composition of the next Summit is hugely important. The Summit must be made into a genuine parliament of the working class!

Freed from the shackles of the SACP 2.0-imposed paralysis, the WCS Steering Committee has played the role it was created for – to steer the way forward to the workers party. But its composition is not ideal. Trade unions and worker and community organisations involved in day-to-day struggles are seriously under-represented, compared, for example, to NGOs.

It is thus of vital importance, for example, that union delegations attending the Summit should be based on workplaces, not head offices alone. At the same time preparations for the summit provides an opportunity to revive the traditions of combining workplace and community struggle that marked the workers movement in the 1980s. Saftu shop stewards have a key role to play in reaching-out to working class community organisations – crisis committees, concerned residents groups etc. – to ensure their participation in the Summit.

Public sector workers anger at the tearing up of the final-leg of the 2018 wage agreement and three-year pay freeze is also being felt by union leaders. The Nehawu leadership's announcement that they will not campaign for the ANC in the upcoming local elections reflects this. Many public-sector workers will be open to building a working class political alternative. Invitations to the summit should be issued directly to the members irrespective of the response of leaders of Cosatu and other federations.

There should be no attempt to emerge from the summit with a pre-fabricated party. The process of party formation must be democratically driven. For this it is necessary to set a date for the launch, even if it is in December or a year ahead. This will provide all struggles currently taking place in isolation from each other with a central point of reference. Raising their sights beyond the immediate issues and uniting across the different arenas democratic working class controlled committees of mass action – in effect pre-party formations – can begin to be established in every province, district, city, town and settlement. Over this period debates should be held over a range of questions such as rules of affiliation, participation in parliament, positions on the local government elections etc. In this way the launch will be the democratic bringing together of forearmed fighting detachments of the working class to create the party of struggle needed.

FORWARD TO A SOCIALIST MASS WORKERS PARTY!

Visit our website for updates on the progress toward the next Summit and our position on the important political and strategic debates that will emerge around it.



IF YOU AGREE WITH WHAT YOU READ - JOIN US!

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2021 Budget

ANC's Attacks on Working Class Deepen

On 24 February, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni delivered the 2021 budget on behalf of the ANC government. It stuck firmly to the plan outlined in June's Special Budget and October's Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement. The working class and poor will pay the highest price for the economic disaster and sovereign-debt crisis accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, in March, StatsSA confirmed that in 2020 the SA economy shrank by a staggering 7%, saying it is the worst slump since at least 1946. Bloomberg cited SA Reserve Bank data that showed it was the biggest economic contraction since 1920.



TITO MBOWENI, THE ANC'S FINANCE MINISTER

Mboweni announced that R303 billion will be cut from the wages of public sector workers over the next four years. The government has been emboldened to deepen its attack on public sector workers by the recent Labour Appeal Court judgment (see p. 10-11). This found that the cancellation of the final-leg of the 2018 public sector wage agreement was not only illegal, but unconstitutional. The weak response of the public sector trade union leaders, who still refuse to prepare their members for a public sector general strike, was an additional green light.

Also in the budget, for the first time in ten years, social grants will not be increased with inflation - i.e. will not keep pace with price rises for food, clothing and other essential goods and services. Over the next three years this will take a massive R36 billion rand away from the eighteen million social grant recipients, the poorest of the poor in society.

The ANC government's hypocritical pretences of being "biased towards the poor" have been stripped-away. Mboweni,

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4 WORKPLACE

ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY EPWP and CHW Workers' Union Buildings Slave Revolt

The Marxist Workers Party is marking the one year anniversary of the Gauteng Community Health Workers (CHW) and Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) workers' march and sleep-over at Union Buildings. This took place on 12 and 13 February 2020, during Ramaphosa's "State of the Nation Address". Attended by 2,000 workers, there were marches through the Pretoria CBD on both days, and on the night of the twelfth, workers occupied the lawns in front of the Union Buildings.

The workers' demands were for permanent jobs and a living wage after spending years on ANC slave-labour programmes that refused to recognise them as workers. The action was a joint programme organised by the MWP, the Gauteng EPWP Workers Forum and the Saftu-affiliated National Union of Public Sector and Allied Workers (Nupsaw) trade union.

In 2020 Ramaphosa's Sona ignored the thousands of angry workers occupying his front lawn, even as he stood up to make the usual empty promises about job creation on behalf of the ANC government. He made the same empty promises this year. The ANC government are 'champions' of *talking* about job creation. However, when they are faced with *real* workers, demanding that their *existing* jobs be saved, they are blind, deaf and dumb.

The action at Union Buildings last February was, we believe, the most significant workers' movement event of 2020.

CHWs

The EPWP workers had been employed by the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development (DID) for up to six years. They had been denied the minimum wage and the minimal protection of labour legislation. At the time of the Union Buildings action, the EPWP workers faced dismissal in six weeks. The Gauteng EPWP Workers Forum was self-organised by the workers themselves to fight this, with MWP member Executive Mukwevho as Provincial Co-ordinator.

Nupsaw had already taken the initiative to organise the CHW 'house slaves', who occupied a position just above the EPWP 'field slaves', with slightly more pay. Unions like Nehawu, affiliated to the ANC-aligned Cosatu, refused to organise these workers, effectively aiding the government's strategy of undermining permanent jobs in the public sector.

Over years of campaigning CHWs in Gauteng had won a significant victory – recognition as permanent workers. They skilfully combined mass action with legal challenges. But government had to be threatened with further mass action for resisting the implementation of a Labour Court judgement. This judgement recognised Gauteng CHWs as permanent workers and required they be moved from Ramaphosa's



EPWP WORKERS MARCH THROUGH PRETORIA ON 13 FEBRUARY 2020

slave-wage minimum of R3,500 and onto the government payroll. This would more than double CHWs salaries and bring other benefits.

This victory inspired EPWP workers. Similar improvements could be won for them too. The willingness of the Nupsaw leadership to unite their CHW campaign with the Forum's EPWP campaign showed the Nupsaw leadership's commitment to workers unity in practise, not just as a slogan. The union welcomed the EPWP workers as members.

Campaign

The action at Union Buildings marked the beginning of a sustained campaign. On 9 March 2020, having received no response to the memorandum handed-over at Union Buildings, EPWP workers protested at the DID's Johannesburg offices. This included occupying the offices overnight. Unable to ignore this, and visibly shaken by the workers' boldness, management agreed to talks. Thus began a long and drawn-out 'cat and mouse' game between the ANC's managers and the workers, which continues even to today.

The dishonesty of the ANC's 'bad faith' approach to negotiations was clear from the first minute they sat down with workers. On the night of 9 March, *after* agreeing to talks the next day, the management pressured the police to forcibly remove the workers. But the police refused. They were themselves disgusted by the shamelessness of the ANC officials. Then, after the protest ended the next day with an agreement for future negotiations to begin, the MWP, Nupsaw, Saftu and the Gauteng EPWP Workers Forum were served with a Labour Court summons as the DID sought to interdict the protest.

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN: The campaign against the ANC's slave-labour programmes is spreading.

In both the North West and Eastern Cape EPWP and Community Works Programme (CWP) workers are creating campaigns to fight for **permanent jobs** and **R12,500**. Nupsaw is continuing with its campaign for the extension of the Gauteng CHW victory to all provinces.

We appeal to all workers on EPWP, CHW, CWP, Early Childhood Development (ECD), Working with Fire, Work for Water, Home Based Care, Community Based Care etc. to contact us, organise and join the campaign! – **Call 081 514 9449.**

This was thrown out by the judge who lambasted the DID for approaching the Labour Court, which adjudicates disputes between employers and employees, when they *refused* to recognise EPWP workers as employees, instead describing them as “beneficiaries”, “volunteers” or “participants” – a cynical strategy to deny them their rights.

Pandemic

The mass dismissal of 3,000+ EPWP workers, was carried-out by the ANC-run DID on schedule. They cruelly used the Covid-19 pandemic, State of Disaster and lockdown to call-off the negotiations they had agreed to. With the army on the streets enforcing the lockdown they were insulated from the mass protests that they would otherwise have faced.

However, it did not have to be this way. The ANC-run Gauteng Government refused to extend the historic victory of CHWs that Nupsaw had extracted from the Department of Health to other departments. It was a political choice of the DID, and the Gauteng Government responsible for it, to withhold a similar deal from the EPWP workers.

Thus began a bleak and hungry few months for EPWP workers. Their stipends were ended and many were unable to access the emergency R350 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant. On application their statuses still showed as “employed”. As a demonstration of their callous indifference over the plight into which they had plunged the EPWP workers, ANC councillors, seeing the EPWP workers as hostile to the ANC, not only manipulated the SRD grant application process, but hijacked food parcels. All of this happened whilst Ramaphosa was making speeches promising that no worker would lose their jobs during the lockdown – as usual, hypocrisy dripped from every one of his words.

As the lockdown eased, workers returned to the streets in June, protesting outside the Gauteng Legislature, demanding they keep promises to intervene made over years of negotiations. With ongoing restrictions on movement and gatherings due to the pandemic, not to mention the desperate poverty workers now faced, a ‘guerrilla’ strategy of regular pickets and protests outside their former workplaces has been fought on and off to keep the flame alive. In October, EPWP workers mass-mobilised again to participate in a Nupsaw day of action at the PIC and Department of Public Service and Administration in Pretoria.

Significance

The MWP salutes both Nupsaw and the CHWs and the determination and perseverance of the EPWP workers to continue their struggle in the face of enormous hardships. Treated little better than slaves when on the EPWP programme, the EPWP workers are now treated like ‘outside dogs’, with every ANC ministry, provincial department and office, repeatedly slamming the door in their faces. Adding insult to injury, whilst refusing to re-employ the EPWP workers, the ANC-run Gauteng Government, its crony cadres and tenderpreneurs have used the pandemic for an orgy of self-enrichment and corruption. The PPE and school cleaning fiascos are just those acts of grand-corruption that have become public.

The EPWP workers should be proud of the historic role they played and the example that they have set for the workers and trade union movement. With virtually no resources, they gave the trade union movement an important lesson in what the slogan “organise the unorganised” should like in practise.

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defiantly justifying the ‘increase’ of social grants by less than the price of a loaf of bread said, “there is no social contract that says every year there must be ‘X’ amount of increase.” Yet in sharp contrast, the already low corporate tax rate of 28% was reduced to 27%. One Treasury official, playing the usual scandalous game of divide-and-rule said it was necessary to take money from social grants in order to fund the temporary Social Relief of Distress grant and Ramaphosa’s long promised job creation programme. There is not a word about measures to stop the R100 billion that big business annually smuggles out of the country through illicit capital flows.

This is quite a different tune to the usual propaganda sung by the ANC government – that, in the pandemic, we are all “in it together”. The reality is cuts for the poor but wealth increases for the rich. In total, government spending on jobs and services will be reduced by 5.2%, or R265 billion, in the coming years. Despite the ongoing pandemic, and expectations that the country will suffer at least a ‘third wave’, not even the health budget will be spared – it is being cut by R3 billion rand over the same period.

In the run-up to the budget, it was widely reported that the government had received a “tax windfall” from an increase in mining industry taxes because of unexpectedly huge profits from mineral exports to China. In other words, the anticipated decline in taxes paid to the government because of reduced economic activity under the lockdown was reduced by what is probably a once-off development. Despite this, the tax shortfall was still the biggest in history by far.

However, Mboweni made it clear that all of this money will be handed over to the SA government’s foreign and domestic capitalist creditors. The profits of these *mashonisas* – the interest on the loans they have made to the government – will consume nearly 21% of government revenue every year for the foreseeable future. This is a massive transfer of wealth from the poor, the working class and the middle class, to the capitalist class.

In the run-up to the Budget, the American-based credit-rating agency company, Moody’s, unelected watchdog for the financial interests of the imperialist powers, threatened that it would downgrade South Africa further if so-called “debt consolidation” – i.e. cuts to pay, jobs and services – was not central. The International Monetary Fund went even further. After a week of meetings with South African government officials they said that, quote, “Reining in large fiscal deficits and debt will require containing the wage bill and avoiding ill-targeted subsidies and transfers to inefficient SOEs”. Local capitalist lobby groups, the Minerals Council of South Africa and Business Unity SA, echoed these calls. The ANC-government delivered for the capitalist class!

The ground continues to be prepared for sharpening class conflict in the coming months and years. The ruling class, or sections of it at least, recognise and fear the social explosion they are preparing. This is why the Social Relief of Distress grant has been extended a second time, now until the end of April. The decision, originating in the ANC NEC, reflects the ruling party’s fear that the growing anger and frustration of the masses will lead to them being punished at the ballot box in the local government elections. Despite these concerns however, the lack of an effective coordinated working class fightback continues to embolden the ANC-government, and the capitalist class behind them, to push their attacks as far as possible.

ANC Faction Struggle

- A Political Crisis for the Entire Ruling Class

The arrest of ANC secretary-general, Ace Magashule, facing 21 charges of corruption, fraud and money laundering, has raised the faction struggle inside the ANC to new highs. Following his first court appearance in November 2020, Magashule told a crowd of supporters that he was elected secretary-general by ANC branches, and that only ANC branches could remove him. In other words, he made it clear that he does not recognise president Ramaphosa's authority within the ANC and that he and his supporters will contest every single step towards the prison cells in which they belong.

In March 2021 Magashule demonstrated his rejection of Ramaphosa's authority in events around the parliamentary vote on whether to proceed with an inquiry into Public Protector Busisiwe Mkhwebane's fitness to hold office. In a meeting of the ANC 'Top 6' to formulate an instruction for how ANC MPs should vote, Magashule argued that the 'Top 6' was not an ANC structure and did not have the authority to 'whip' the ANC's parliamentary caucus. In the end 62 of the ANC's 230 MPs did not attend the vote. It is unclear just how many did so in support of Magashule and defiance of Ramaphosa.

Magashule's supporters, the so-called 'Radical Economic Transformation' faction, are a 'who's-who' of corrupt and disgraced individuals. They include, for example, Carl Niehaus, the spokesperson of the MK Veterans Association, who falsely claimed his own mother was dead in an attempt to avoid paying debts, and Supra Mahumapelo, the former premier of the North West, whose corrupt administration destroyed service delivery so thoroughly in that province, that widespread community protests forced him to step-down.

Zuma & Zondo

In his speech to supporters outside the court in November Magashule praised former-president Jacob Zuma, who is also still desperately trying to avoid going on trial for corruption, and walked out of the Zondo Commission into State Capture. Magashule falsely claimed that the only reason Zuma was facing charges was because he wanted to "return the land to black people"!

In an indication of the raised temperature of the ANC faction struggle, and its ripple-effect through the ruling class, Zuma, emboldened by Magashule's support, demanded that Judge Zondo 'recuse' himself - meaning step-down from chairing the commission because of an alleged conflict of interest. In turn, Judge Zondo, faced with the threat of the credibility of the Commission following Zuma's walk-out, and the refusal to answer any questions by Zuma-supporter Dudu Myeni when she appeared, had no alternative but to have criminal charges laid against him, referring the matter to the Constitutional Court and opening the possibility of Zuma's arrest.

Zuma subsequently announced that he would defy the Constitutional Court's order to re-appear before the Zondo Commission. This decision was clearly influenced by the continuation of devastating revelations at the Commission about the Zuma presidency, for example around the State



MAGASHULE IN COURT CHARGED WITH CORRUPTION, FRAUD & MONEY LAUNDERING

Security Agency (see Izwi Podcast #6). This escalated tensions in the ANC's faction struggle even further and revealed that the differences between the RET faction and the 'constitutional democrats' of the Ramaphosa faction disagree on something as fundamental as upholding the entire post-apartheid constitutional framework.

Split Feared

While Ramaphosa has the upper-hand, it is possible, given the deepening tensions, that a damaging split cannot be ruled-out. In desperation to avoid this however, Ramaphosa is more and more tying his own hands, causing despair amongst the sections of the ruling class who look to him to stabilise capitalism on their behalf.

At both the December and January meetings of the ANC's National Executive Committee (NEC) there was no action - or even discussion! - of the arrest of Magashule. Reports of the ANC Integrity Commission remain in Ramaphosa's in-tray and semantic debates about the 'meaning' of the ANC's 'step-aside rule' stumble around in circles. Meanwhile, Magashule remains in office and on duty.

It has also emerged that the report of the 2018 investigation into the SSA, that formed the foundation for testimony at the Zondo Commission, has been in Ramaphosa's hands since December 2018. The report clearly implicates former Minister of State Security, David Mahlobo, and former SSA director-general, Arthur Fraser, as key architects in looting the SSA and organising unlawful operations. Yet, in May 2019, Ramaphosa retained Mahlobo in his cabinet, albeit demoting him to a deputy-minister in the Department of Human Settlements. Fraser too remains in high government office, currently director-general of correctional services.

After three years as president this exposes the hollowness of Ramaphosa's claim to be determined to clean-up party and state. The promise is now that the March NEC meeting will take a clear position on the ANC's "step-aside" rule for members implicated in corruption. But any decision will almost certainly be contested likely pushing the stand-off to the June National General Council.

Corruption

The escalation of the faction struggle in the ANC comes at the worst possible time for the capitalist class. The pandemic has acted as the great accelerator to the crisis of South Africa's capitalist economy. It has extended one lost decade of economic stagnation to a possible two and brought a possible sovereign-debt crisis years closer than might have otherwise been the case (see p. 3).

The ANC has been the main instrument of capitalist rule since 1994. In defence of the capitalist system as a whole, the party has managed the delicate balance between the different factions of the ruling class and attempted to maintain a certain level of social stability through its co-option of the leaders of the working class, particularly in Cosatu.

However, from a source of stability for capitalism in the first years of democracy, the ANC has turned into its opposite, and become a major source of instability. The capitalist class has secured the ANC's collusion in the preservation of capitalism by looting the SA economy. According to Judge Dennis Davies R100 billion leaves the country through illicit capital flows every year.

Corruption developed to new heights under Zuma's presidency and has, in reality, continued at much the same level under Ramaphosa's as the PPE-scandal revealed. Originating as a symptom of South African capitalism's economic crisis, corruption is now a major contributor to that crisis in its own right. It undermines social support across all classes, not just for the ANC, but for the entire post-1994 political and economic order. The expression this takes in terms of rhetoric and political programme varies across classes and factions of classes.

Ruling Class Divisions

Big business and the monopolies are screaming for cuts to government spending – except where government spending is used to boost their profits, as for example in the planned infrastructure programme, or the creation of Special Economic Zones. The Ramaphosa government is committed to carrying through this programme on behalf of big business.

But, against the background of a stagnant, and now shrinking economy, this increasingly comes into collision with the interests of another faction of the ruling class – the tenderpreneurs and aspirant black capitalists. In a smaller economy there are fewer and less valuable company shares to be re-distributed through BEE deals; less government spending means fewer tenders. Just like a gang of thieves, the struggle within the ruling class over how to divide amongst themselves the spoils of capitalism – the fruits of the exploitation of the working class – always a feature of capitalist society, is intensifying.

Ultimately, the faction struggle in the ANC is a reflection of this. The "Radical Economic Transformation" rhetoric of Zuma, Magashule and their supporters is nothing but an attempt to harness the legitimate frustration of the black middle class and black working class and use it as a base of social support from which they can land heavier blows in their intra-class struggle.

Ideologically, the Economic Freedom Fighters and the ANC's RET faction occupy identical ideological grounds, cheered on by reactionary formations like Black First Land First. In the final analysis, supporters of the National Democratic Revolution in the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party, along with those who wish to reform capitalism in the Saftu leadership, play into the hands of the RET camp by arguing to preserve rather than overthrow capitalism.

If a split does develop in the ANC and follows the current factional lines, there could be a certain political re-grouping of the various RET forces, both those currently within and outside the ANC. However, it would be extremely unstable. Magashule and Zuma were cleared by an internal ANC investigation for their role in the establishment of the African Transformation Movement to take votes from the Ramaphosa-led ANC in the 2019 elections. But now Magashule is openly organising RET structures within the ANC armed with a faction-manifesto drafted by Niehaus - Radical Economic Transformation: A Basic Document. Rumours are again swirling that Niehaus is organising a "new party" from his offices in Luthuli House.

Fuel for Reaction

The crisis in the Democratic Alliance is also a symptom of the very same social processes. Their new rejection of "race" as a way of categorising people is their own re-statement of how they believe the spoils of capitalism should be divided-up. They are defending the privileges of the established white middle class and petty bourgeois against the claims of their black counterparts, as South African capitalism's economic crisis extends into the indefinite future.

All the parties and all their factions have fallen back on South Africa's racial divisions, and chosen to inflame racial tensions, to camouflage various class-agendas. This has had further consequences, legitimising xenophobia, as seen in the launch of Herman Mashaba's Action SA party, the raids on African foreign-owned shops by gangs claiming to be members of the MK Veterans Association in Durban, and the burning of trucks. The Afrikaner nationalist party, the Freedom Front Plus whose vote increased by 200,000 in the 2019 elections, has stoked racial fears to boost its support.

RET is not only being used politically as a cover for self-enrichment, but also for outright criminal activity. AK-47 wielding criminal gangs have brought major construction projects to a standstill in some areas, demanding as much as a 30% share of profits at gunpoint.

Working Class Alternative

Overwhelmingly, and correctly, the working class and poor reject all of these parties and factions as reflected in the ever-decreasing voter-turnout. This trend was again confirmed in the Super Wednesday by-elections in November 2020. Taken all together, the ruling class faces a growing crisis of political representation, with none of its parties capable of commanding sufficient social support, now, or in the future, to stabilise, defend and preserve capitalism.

The working class must view the growing divisions within the ruling class as an opportunity – an invitation is being issued to the working class to come and remove them from power. But this requires a political vehicle. The passive abstention of millions, and the votes cast for the ANC, EFF and others through gritted teeth for lack of an alternative, must be turned into something positive – the creation of a socialist mass workers party, capable of forming a workers government, and replacing diseased capitalism with a democratic socialist society.

STOP PRESS: As *Izwi* goes to press reports are emerging from the ANC's March NEC that the meeting "descended into chaos" over the decision that corruption-accused leaders be given seven days to step-aside or face suspension. Visit our website for analysis of the latest developments.

STUDENT PROTESTS

Build an INDEPENDENT Socialist Student & Youth Movement

Student protests dominated headlines in March. The brutal and senseless killing of Mthokozisi Ntumba by police as he exited a clinic, unwittingly stepping into a confrontation between protesting students and police, has caused shock and outrage. Two student journalists were also shot with rubber bullets and injured.

The protests began at Wits University in Johannesburg and have since spread to several other universities and a number of TVET colleges. On Monday 15 March a 'national shutdown' was called.

The protests have coincided with the re-opening of campuses following the delayed beginning of the academic year due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Some institutions, for example TUT, are still struggling to complete the 2020 academic year. This gives an indication of the enormous disruption that students have faced over the past year as the country has moved between lockdown levels and stumbled between two 'waves' of the pandemic, with a third expected as winter begins. Restrictions on face-to-face teaching, access to university facilities such as labs and libraries, access to the infrastructure necessary for online learning like laptops and data etc. have all fuelled frustration.

The pandemic, by accelerating and worsening capitalism's economic crisis, has inflamed the crisis of student debt, both current and historic, which has now reached a massive R13 billion. This has raised the spectre of growing numbers of financial exclusions as registration is denied to new and returning students with outstanding debts. This disproportionately affects students from poor and working class backgrounds every year. But the massive job losses, furloughs on reduced pay etc., under the pandemic, affecting the ability of many more students' parents to assist with fees and living costs, has sharpened and deepened this persistent problem. At Wits University, according to Daily Maverick, a staggering 27,000 of the 37,500 students require some form of financial aid.

A number of university managements have already made concessions and allowed students with debt to register, for example at both UCT and UWC in the Western Cape. The University of the Free State is now allowing students with debt of less than R25,000 to register. Other institutions will likely follow suit. In addition, the government has agreed to make more funding available to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). These concessions are intended to dampen the anger and frustration of existing students and cut across any spread or escalation of the protests

In the February budget (see p. 3) cuts of R24.6 billion for the Department of Higher Education & Training (DHET) were initiated – R6.8 billion of which will be stripped away from NSFAS. This will guarantee that in future years fewer and fewer students from poor and working class backgrounds will be able to secure places in higher education. Already, 5.5 million under-30s are not in employment, education or training, with



SAFTU MEMBERS PICKET IN SOLIDARITY WITH STUDENT PROTESTORS

63.2% of those aged 15-24 unemployed, an increase of 5% from just one year ago. This already desperate situation is set to worsen.

Cuts to education have been happening for years. What is different this time is that the ANC-government's medium- and long-term strategy is now to reduce access to higher education for future generations. In 2015 under the pressure of the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) mass student movement then-President Zuma was forced to make concessions on fees. On the eve of the ANC's 2017 Nasrec conference Zuma announced his intention to bring in "free" higher education – a cynical move designed to promote the interests of the 'Radical Economic Transformation' (RET) faction in the ANC's internal war.

This nevertheless created an expectation of free education which the Ramaphosa government must now banish as part of the generalised effort by the ruling class to pass the bill for the crisis of capitalism, including the sovereign-debt crisis, onto the working class. Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education, and Secretary-General of the SA "Communist" Party, has used the "difficult fiscal situation" to defend his own complicity.

Movement

Inevitably comparisons are being drawn with the 2015 #FeesMustFall mass movement which forced the Zuma government to cancel a planned fee increase for the following year and placed the issue of free education firmly on the agenda. This movement represented a new development – the annual student struggles against financial and academic exclusions spread from the "historically black universities" to embrace the more elite "historically white universities" too.

#FMF itself built on a certain level of organisation amongst students that had developed earlier that year around the #RhodesMustFall protests, #Occupy protests in Tshwane, and others. These also led to an explosion of political debate

around issues of racism, the 'decolonisation' of education and the unequal structure of society. Crucially, these new 'networks' had a level of independence from the student organisations that usually dominate 'student politics', such as the South African Union of Students (SAUS), the ANC's Sasco, the DA's Daso, or the EFF's Student Command – the kindergartens of the capitalist parties that manage society and the economy in the interests of the bosses. This was attractive to the broader mass of students.

The current round of protests are nowhere near the scale or political level of the #FMF movement, notwithstanding the limitations that existed in that movement. The current protests are dominated by the student political organisations, especially Sasco and EFF Student Command, with SAUS singing from the sidelines and in the media.

Petty bourgeois nationalism, always a strong feature of student politics, has its most reactionary side to the fore. Sasco leaders echo the rhetoric of the ANC's corrupt RET faction. Indeed, they have been willing to openly identify themselves with former-President Zuma, whose corruption trial starts in May, and marched to the Constitutional Court on 11 March with ANC secretary-general Ace Magashule, whose corruption trial begins in August!

EFFSC leaders echo their parent organisation's crude anti-white (and anti-Indian) economic nationalist programme. Trotsky's description of the potential for the nationalism of the oppressed masses to be "the outer-shell of an immature Bolshevism" is almost entirely absent amongst the forces making the most radical noises, like the EFF. They are the least capable of identifying the immediate attacks on working class students with the broader struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the socialist transformation of society and the linking-up with the working class this would require.

The levels of solidarity that existed across institutions in #FMF is missing too. EFFSC, Sasco and SAUS all seem to have made rival shutdown calls ahead of 15 March, jockeying with each other for dominance as attempts to spread the national shutdown were made. TUT and Fort Hare SRCs refused to support the national shutdown.

But the most important difference with #FMF is that in the current protests the overwhelming majority of students most directly affected by financial exclusion are not actively participating. #FMF mobilised tens of thousands – not only students who could not afford the fee increase, but, importantly, students who could, but wanted to take part in a united struggle of all students to transform higher education from root to branch.

Even after two weeks, none of the protests at Wits University appeared to exceed one to two hundred in an institution with 37,500 enrolled students. These are protests by politically-aligned student activists protesting on behalf of the vast majority but making no serious efforts to involve the broader student-body in democratic consultations or the planning of protests. It is the top-down method of the ANC and EFF. The Sasco-led Wits SRC, currently seen as the 'leaders' of the protest movement, was elected last year on a turnout of only 25.23%, barely scraping the 25% threshold to be declared "duly elected".

Way Forward

We believe that the vast majority of students will be watching the protests with sympathy, hoping for victories, but will be

"Cuts to education have been happening for years. What is different this time is that the ANC-government's medium- and long-term strategy is now to reduce access to higher education for future generations."

completely repulsed by the political affiliation and methods of those currently dominating the leadership.

Those students watching with itchy feet, eager to hit the streets, but currently holding back, as well as any genuine activists in Sasco, EFFSC etc. should make the call for the building of a new and independent mass socialist student and youth movement. This is the unfinished business of #FMF. After the 2016 fee increase was defeated the mass movement ebbed. The student political organisations that had been forced to follow the mood of the mass movement regained their footing and re-directed the ebbing movement for their own narrow political advantage.

The starting point of building such a movement should be the convening of mass campus-based student assemblies. These could draw more students into the protest movement. Crucially, they should elect democratic and accountable leadership to exercise day-to-day control over the programme of protest action, demands, and any negotiations with management, government departments and ministers. Assemblies could then link-up on a national basis, creating the first outline of a genuinely national and co-ordinated movement. TVET students and the unemployed/NEET youth languishing in the townships must be drawn into such a movement.

It will be crucial for students to link-up with workers in the trade union movement. The cuts to the DHET are being replicated across every government department. The running down of public services will effect workers and communities. Public sector workers have recently had the final-leg of a three-year pay deal scrapped by the ANC government and a further three year pay freeze threatened. An attack of this scale cannot be defeated by students alone. Students need to link-up with workers fighting the budget and pay cuts and unite their demands in a powerful new movement. In addition to leading the struggle for free education, such a movement must fill the political vacuum, currently filled by the capitalist parties and their student-wings, by consciously joining forces with the efforts currently under way in the Saftu trade union federation to create a mass socialist mass workers party.

WE SAY:

- Free education – NOW!
Organise against financial exclusions.
- Cancel ALL student debt – current and historic.
- No to police brutality! Demilitarise the police.
 - For Student and youth unity.
- Build an independent socialist student & youth movement.
Build links with workers.
- Convene mass campus-assemblies.
Elect democratic and accountable leadership.

Anti-Democratic Court Rulings

- A Warning to the Working Class

On 15 December the Labour Appeal Court (LAC) sided with the ANC government and upheld its decision to cancel the final-leg of the three-year 2018 public sector pay agreement. More than one million workers have had pay increases withheld from their pay packets since April last year. The government's argument for renegeing on the deal was that it simply "does not have the money" to pay it. In supporting the ANC government's decision the LAC judges declared the agreement not only illegal but **unconstitutional!** This is a **deeply political** and a **deeply ideological** ruling as we will go on to explain.

The crisis of public finances is the result of decades of corruption and neo-liberal policies that have bled, and are bleeding, state-coffers dry. The capitalist class is being enriched through the tender-system and outsourcing, low corporate taxes, and the illicit capital flows. The courts now present this edifice, consciously constructed in the interests of the capitalist class, as if it is a naturally occurring phenomenon, standing above the classes, and a reason in itself for attacking the pay of workers! This alone should be sufficient to reaffirm the foundations of the Marxist theory of the state – that the state, including the courts, are not neutral but an instrument of class rule.

Reinforcing the LAC judgement is another devastating anti-worker ruling by the Constitutional Court in a dispute between metalworkers' union, Numsa, and Aveng Steel. The ConCourt upheld the dismissal of 733 workers for rejecting unilateral changes to their terms and conditions. The catch-all excuse of so-called "operational requirements" – in Aveng's case, declining profits – can now be used as a legal precedent to re-structure companies without consulting the workforce. Workers who refuse the imposition of unilateral changes can be dismissed. The common thread running through both judgments is the dire economic crisis – again, as if it is a naturally occurring phenomenon.

The SAA workers' demand for back-pay, as well as those of the SABC workers for management to adhere to the provisions of the Labour Relations Act (LRA), have also been thrown out of court. Similarly the South Gauteng High Court has just overturned the National Energy Regulator's decision to deny Eskom the 15% tariff increase it wants to impose to make the utility attractive for private investors. Eskom is at the same time aggressively stepping-up electricity cut-offs, especially in working class townships, where R-billions are owed because starvation wages and mass unemployment make it impossible to pay Eskom's bills.

All of this builds on the undermining of the right to strike in the 2015 amendments to the LRA. These aimed at crippling the right to strike through compulsory secret ballots, limitations on picketing to allow strike-breaking and granting the state the right to unilaterally declare strikes illegal under the pretext that they are 'economically damaging' – as every strike is intended to be! What remains in the LRA is being hollowed out, leaving it a dead-letter. The CCMA has had its budget slashed by nearly two-thirds and its 565 part-time commissioners dismissed.

Taken all together it is clear that for the capitalist class the



NUPSAW PROTEST OUTSIDE THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICE & ADMINISTRATION, 20 OCT 2020

labour relations landscape of the last 25 years is over. The LAC judges' ruling actively encourages the unilateral tearing-up of collective agreements. Unfortunately, the full implications of this do not yet appear to be recognised by the majority of trade union leaders.

Anti-Democratic Ruling

The LAC judges' arguments should serve as a wider warning to the working class. They come against the background of an unprecedented onslaught against the working class. It is a new departure for the capitalist state's judicial-wing to so openly strip itself of its hypocritical pretence to 'impartiality' in the struggle between the classes.

The entire ruling political and economic elite never tire of reminding us of the "miracle" of the negotiated settlement at Codesa that gave SA the "best constitution in the world". We are told that power was transferred from the white minority into the hands of the majority. We allegedly now have a government of the people, whose interests the new post-apartheid order must serve and answer to.

But in the LAC-ruling the judges argued that the cabinet had no right to mandate the Minister for Public Service and Administration to break the fiscal-ceiling Treasury had placed on the public sector wage bill in order to sign the 2018 agreement.

The MWP is clear about the ANC. It is a capitalist party representing the interests of the capitalist class as a whole – the still predominantly white economic dictatorship, previously served by the apartheid-regime, and their post-apartheid black apprentices. For more than a quarter of a century the disaster of 'democratic' capitalism has drained away working class illusions in the ANC to the point where it now only enjoys the active electoral support of less than 28% of the eligible voting-age population. In 2019, for the first time since 1994, the combined support of all the parties in parliament fell below 50%.

But by their own claims, the ANC-government is democratically

elected; its cabinet is its mandated representative in public sector collective bargaining. The LAC judges are not elected. They are selected from within the middle and upper classes and appointed to their positions. Claims about the "sovereignty of the people" are their arguments not ours. But we should still hold them to it! The judges should accordingly have no right to override the agreements arrived at between a government elected by more than ten million voters and unions representing millions of workers and their families.

The LAC judgement reveals the real meaning behind the oath of allegiance to the constitution taken by judges. They are not answerable to the people, but to a constitution whose central aim is the preservation of the capitalist class's economic dictatorship behind the mask of parliamentary democracy. It is buttressed by clauses that place a barrier before the democratic claims of the people and compels the working class majority to subordinate their interests to those of the tiny capitalist minority who own the commanding heights of the economy – the banks, the mines, the big factories and commercial farms etc.

Broadening Capitalist Offensive

The judges would not normally ignore the barriers that ordinarily prevent the different wings of the state (the judiciary, legislature and the executive) from 'interfering' in each other's jurisdictions – the supposedly sacrosanct doctrine of 'the separation of powers'. They have done so now because capitalism is in the grip of the deepest crisis since the end of apartheid. The bill for this crisis must be presented to the working class. When its vital interests are at stake, the capitalist class does not hesitate to dispense with the "democratic" niceties with which it attempts to fool the working class in ordinary times.

The LAC judgment is a broadening of the war on the working class. For such an offensive the light artillery of previous assaults would not do. The heavy weaponry of the highest Labour Court in the land was necessary. The ANC-government's fiscal strategy to keep the government debt below 100% of GDP is to be achieved by a wage freeze in the public sector for the next three years, further savage cuts in social spending and to offer SOEs, starting with SAA and Eskom, for sale to the private sector for a song. The signs of some recovery in the global and SA economy are anaemic. There is no prospect for economic growth coming anywhere near the 5.4% per year for ten years successively – calculated by the Ramaphosa-chaired National Planning Commission in 2011 – merely to keep poverty at a standstill. The crisis conditions that have brought the classes

...the trade union movement needs to prepare its members for the mass defiance of unjust labour laws, and build a mass campaign for the scrapping of the LRA amendments and ... over-turning the recent anti-worker court judgements."

into collision with each other are here for the foreseeable future.

There is nothing wrong with approaching the ConCourt over the public sector wage dispute as some trade unions are doing. But we must be under no illusions: this battle is going to be settled in the streets not the courts. If collective bargaining agreements can be declared illegal and unconstitutional retroactively in the public sector, then the private sector bosses will be only too happy to follow the government's example. Given the bleak economic prospects, why even bother with collective bargaining at all.

Trade Union Rights

The Public Servants Association is appealing the LAC's judgement at the Constitutional Court – the same court that ruled against Numsa in the Averg case! But no more time should be wasted in mobilising workers for a public sector general strike, a call that the MWP has been making for more than a year.

In addition, the trade union movement needs to prepare its members for the mass defiance of unjust labour laws, and build a mass campaign for the scrapping of the LRA amendments and the passing of a Trade Union Freedom bill, drafted by workers' representatives, *increasing* the powers of trade unions and over-turning the recent anti-worker court judgements. Of course, none of the parties represented in parliament would be willing to support such a bill.

What the government, the bosses and the judiciary have done is to place the question of which class governs society firmly on the table. So again, we return to the need for the trade union movement to seriously take-up the building of a socialist mass workers party to engage in the political front of the class struggle. We call on all working class organisations to send delegates to the re-convened Working Class Summit on 11 and 12 May to discuss how to bring a mass workers party into existence.

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Women, Covid-19 & the Struggle Against Gender-Based Violence in South Africa

The announcement of the most vicious cuts in social spending since the fall of apartheid, while simultaneously cutting taxes on big business, is a declaration of war against the working class, especially women. The budget (see p. 3) has been announced against a background of a war on women. As is the case throughout the world, women in South Africa have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. The hard lockdown, which led to the shutdown of the economy and job losses worse than in the 2009 recession, disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable layers of the working class, especially women.

In a survey conducted shortly after the March to June hard lockdown women already accounted for two-thirds of the total net job losses. Women also make up the majority of the five million workers employed in the informal economy – in community care, domestic work, street and market trade, waste picking, restaurant workers – most of whom lost their wages and income. Many of these workers receive wages that are regulated through the Sectoral Determination Act, unashamedly a third less than the national minimum wage of the paltry R3,500 per month. For example, the majority of domestic workers (74%) earn less than the minimum wage.

This same survey reports that women are more likely than men to live in households that reported running out of money for food already in April 2020. In addition, more women than men are living with children and spend more hours on childcare since the start of the lockdown. This is in addition to caring for those who fall ill after becoming infected with Covid-19.

Overcrowding

According to another survey, risk factors contributing to women's vulnerability to infection include that they often live in crowded conditions in informal settlements. Many are likely to suffer co-morbidities such as hypertension, diabetes, tuberculosis and HIV/Aids. During the first and second wave of the pandemic, many needlessly died because of overcrowding in hospitals, lack of ICU beds, oxygen and personal protective equipment. There were overworked healthcare workers who simply could not cope with the volume of sick and dying people. Many of the patients turned away from hospitals, or who opted not to go there for fear of infection, died in homes where the burden of care was on women.

Those women who have continued to work have been at an even higher risk of infection because they are mostly employed in front-line services such as nursing, cleaning and cashiers. Moreover, working women are most likely to be using mini-bus taxis where social distancing, sanitising and ventilation is difficult to observe. Those trapped in their homes with no income, depending on their male partners who may or may not have lost their job in the pandemic, have been at greater risk of gender-based violence.

Already amongst the highest levels globally, gender-based violence, including the brutal killing of women by intimate partners, exploded during the lockdown. It led to the president, Cyril Ramaphosa, describing it as South Africa's "second pandemic".



WOMEN WORKERS ARE A MAJORITY ON THE EPWP

Spending

The cuts the budget announced will have a devastating impact on the working class whose jobs have been decimated during the Covid-19 pandemic. The government is claiming that its social welfare programme – which includes child care, foster care and disability grants – covers a far greater percentage of the population than similar schemes in other countries, such as the Bolsa Familia in Brazil, and that it has played an allegedly significant role in alleviating poverty. But in South Africa, there is no income support for any adult between the ages of 18 and 59, after which they qualify for the equally pitiful state pension.

Yet under ANC rule, South Africa has become the most unequal country on the planet with estimates that poverty has escalated to 70% of the population. The face of poverty in South Africa is female and black. The austerity measures hurt women especially, who rely on social grants and public services to take care of the elderly, the disabled and children. Under public pressure, as the effect of the hard lockdown became immediately evident, the government initially introduced a small temporary top-up for child care grants and old-age pensions, as well as an insulting Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRD) of R350 for those without jobs. The callous indifference of the government revealed itself in the disqualification of women with children from this support.

Finance Minister Tito Mboweni was asked on television why the increase in pensions and other social grants was below inflation. Contemptuously brushing aside his spokesperson's spin about the unavoidable necessity to continue with "budget consolidation" i.e. an escalation in already savage public spending cuts, Mboweni replied: "The political answer is that there is no need to be apologetic about that at all. There is no social contract that says every year there must be an x amount increase."

What is a reduction in real terms actually cuts far deeper than the official inflation rate into the ability of working class people, already eking out an existence, to survive. Food prices have risen rapidly. They will climb even higher as the increase

in electricity tariffs granted by the courts to the electricity utility, Eskom, and the fuel levy increase in the budget ripple through the economy.

Hunger, especially for children, had already risen alarmingly under the hard lockdown, as the government stopped school feeding schemes in working class areas along with the school closures. These feeding schemes provide hundreds of thousands of children with their only decent meal of the day. Despite the easing of the lockdown, hunger will increase in a country where the growth of up to 27% of children is stunted because of malnutrition and 38% of children are at risk of "poor development".

According to the Economic Justice and Dignity group, women have reported that they cannot afford food, and so cut back on what they eat. They estimate that the average cost of feeding a child between 10 and 13 years of age is R678 while the child support grant is R440.

Working Class Response

Yet, these very same services are under assault with the latest budget cuts; only the organised working class led by the trade unions can resist them effectively and begin to reverse the downward spiral to the bottom.

The national strike called by the South African Federation of Trade Unions on 24 February, though poorly organised, could not have come any sooner, reflecting the growing pressure on the union leadership to 'Fight Back', as one of the placards on the demonstration demanded. The strike represented the first sign of the beginning of an organised counter-offensive against the attacks on the working class under the guise of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While supporting the strike, the Marxist Workers Party has called for a date to be set immediately following the strike to launch a concerted campaign to mobilise support for action that could draw in wider sections of the working class. This should include other union federations and communities that have suffered major cutbacks in services, in local infrastructure maintenance, electricity cut-offs and, above all, a bloodbath of job losses.

In preparation for this, there must be a conscious linking together of the workplace struggle to combat gender-based violence, including by tackling sexual harassment within trade unions and at the workplace with the trade union movement placing itself at the forefront in a joint struggle. This would be the most effective way to overcome the serious weaknesses of the pre-pandemic 'Gender Based Violence' (GBV) protests.

While there was significant publicity given to the anti-GBV mobilisation that attracted a layer of young women, these movements have mostly been predominantly middle class-led. One was organised, for example, in Sandton – said to be the richest piece of real estate in Africa – making liberal appeals to big business at the Stock Exchange to "do their bit"! Channelled into safe government-led initiatives and programmes to combat GBV, these struggles could not and did not develop into a movement that connected the pandemic of GBV to the deteriorating socio-economic conditions in which such violence thrives.

Class Fight

A campaign led by women trade unionists will fill the struggle against GBV with the class content it lacked in the pre-pandemic protests. A conscious turn must be made

to that layer of women workers already in the forefront of struggle such as those in the EPWP (Expanded Public Works Programme) campaign, the cheap labour scheme promoted as poverty alleviation.

There is another contingent of predominantly women workers – the Community Health Workers who have been at the frontline of tracking and tracing for the pandemic. The fact that these workers are employed as teaching and nursing assistants, care workers, fire-fighters, gardeners, security officers, roads, parks workers and many other service jobs, provides a perfect point of intersection. It links their struggle for permanent jobs and a living wage of R12,500 and the broader struggle of public sector workers for the payment of their stolen wages and the threat to their own permanent jobs inherent in the government's assault on them all.

Already, there has been a very significant victory of the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers for recognition of community health workers as permanent staff. The union has now brought together the EPWP and Community Health Workers (CHW) in a joint campaign to extend this victory to every other province. Given the nature of their jobs, both CWHs and EPWPs provide the best links with communities which Saftu has pledged will be brought into the mobilisation for the next battle.

All these struggles need to come together. A united fight against the consequences of both pandemics – Covid-19 and GBV – linked with workplace struggles against the assault on the working class, as a whole, would represent a huge step forward. It has the potential to serve as a catalyst to revive the labour movement both in the workplace but also on the political plane in a united campaign for a mass workers' party on a socialist programme.

WE SAY:

- **For working class unity and leadership against gender based violence!** Build a class-independent trade union Campaign Against Sexual Harassment, Domestic Violence, Rape and Femicide. United workers' action to end sexual harassment in the workplace.
- **Make Social Relief of Distress Grant permanent and increase it to R3,500 p/m as a step toward R8,000 p/m.**
- **For gender equality in the pocket! Equal pay for work of equal value.** Struggle for a living minimum wage of R12,500 for all workers.
- **A mass decent house-building, electricity, water, sanitation, road and public transport infrastructure programme.** Nationalise the big construction companies, building wholesalers and big building retailers.
- **Funding and resources to end violence against women and children.** For (i) a free, accessible, secure and high-quality network of women's shelters for survivors of domestic abuse and rape, with provision for children, giving women the freedom to leave abusive relationships, (ii) an increase in the child support grant, (iii) free, accessible, secure and high-quality pre-school child-care and elderly-care centres to relieve the domestic burden on women, (iv) free, accessible and high-quality sexual health and family planning services to allow women genuine choice over if, and when, to have children, (v) dismiss all police officers, magistrates and judges guilty of victim blaming in cases of gender-based violence and LGBT+ hate crimes.

UGANDA The 2021 Election & the Rise of Bobi Wine

President Yoweri Museveni has returned to power after claiming victory in Uganda's 14 January presidential elections. The Uganda Electoral Commission awarded Museveni and his ruling-National Resistance Movement (NRM) 58.64% of the vote (5.8 million votes) and laughably rejected accusations of vote-rigging. Museveni retains the odious title of one of Africa's top-five longest serving rulers.

In reality, journalists and opposition candidates faced brutal repression at the hands of the police, army and intelligence services. On election day itself, the internet was switched-off. The regime singled-out Bobi Wine (real name Robert Kyagulanyi), a young, popular musician and businessman contesting the presidency for the first-time. They saw him as a serious threat and emerging focal-point for opposition. Wine was awarded second place by the Electoral Commission with 34.83% of the vote (3.5 million votes).

The election has given a snapshot of important shifts taking place within Ugandan society, where a massive 80% of the population is under-30 years old. Amongst the youth in particular there is a search for an alternative to poverty, the lack of decent jobs and Museveni's corrupt and repressive 35-year rule. It is to the youth, or at least sections of it, that Wine's campaign has appealed. Similar processes have been reflected across the continent in recent movements in Algeria, Sudan and Nigeria.

Unfree and Unfair Elections

Uganda's *Daily Monitor* has exposed that votes from 1,257 polling stations were not even counted before Museveni was declared the winner. The uncounted ballots are from areas that, even with clear rigging, returned huge majorities for Wine, for example in the capital Kampala, and the Wakiso District which surrounds the capital. The Electoral Commission, far from denying this, has defended it! They have cited the constitution which requires a presidential winner to be declared within 48-hours of the close of polls regardless of the state of counting.

In the run-up to the election, Wine and other candidates, faced brutal repression. A crackdown by state-forces on the protests in response to Wine's arrest in November caused 54 deaths. In December Wine's bodyguard was run-down and killed by a car and his campaign team was arrested. In the days leading up to the election, the team Wine organised to replace them was also arrested. Wine himself was placed under house-arrest on the day of the election, where, he remained for several weeks.

Despite this well-publicised repression capitalist governments are showing their usual hypocrisy on questions of democracy. Museveni has been a key ally of the imperialist powers, especially Britain and the United States, since he seized power in 1986, ending a bloody-civil war and bringing a degree of stability that could allow the exploitation of the region's resources.

The Africa Minister of Britain (the former colonial power) said that he and Boris Johnson's Conservative Party government "welcomes the relatively calm passing of the elections in



BOBI WINE, THE "GHETTO PRESIDENT"

Uganda" and simply "noted" Museveni's re-election. The British government, among other interests, is protecting UK oil company Tallow Oil, a Conservative Party donor with major investments in Uganda. *Declassified UK* has reported that British Ministers have lobbied Museveni to cancel a £210 million tax bill of Tallow's. The United States State Department has just said it is "deeply troubled" and "gravely concerned", after spending billions of dollars over decades arming and equipping Museveni's state forces. The South African government, currently holding the chair of the African Union, which itself has maintained a deafening silence on Museveni's violent campaign to ensure his grip on power, is taking a "wait and see approach".

The Rise of Wine

Bobi Wine's popularity amongst the youth and the poor is linked to the perception of his "rags to riches" rise. Through his own experiences and observations of life in the slums and the repression of the regime Wine's music became increasingly political. As he rose in popularity he became known as the "ghetto president". Wine is now a Ugandan shilling-billionaire (Shs. 40 billion) and a dollar-millionaire (\$1.4 million), owning a mansion in Kampala, a fleet of luxury cars, a private beach on Lake Victoria and with business interests in property development, leisure, farming and retail.

In 2017 Wine stood in a parliamentary by-election and won by a landslide. Initially seeking the nomination of the main opposition party, Forum for Democratic Change, he stood as an independent candidate when this was not granted. In parliament, Wine took the lead in opposing Museveni's ultimately successful efforts to remove the presidential age-limit from the constitution which would have prevented him from running in the 2021 elections. This was the key issue in the coalescing of Wine's 'People Power Movement' – a diffuse movement lacking any structures or clear programme, but which acted as a pole of attraction for a layer of youth.

In July 2020, anticipating that the regime would deny the registration of the People Power Movement, an agreement was struck for Wine to take-over the moribund, but registered,

National Unity Platform (NUP). Quickly, all sixteen MPs from the second-largest opposition Democratic Party, whose youth-wing had played a role in Wine's 2017 by-election victory, defected to the NUP, as well as three independent MPs, and even two MPs from Museveni's NRM.

Programme

Wine's take-over of the NUP and run for president forced him to turn the popular, but vague, message of the People's Power Movement into a concrete manifesto. The results were disappointing. The entire document, *A New Uganda*, labours under the illusion that a 'proper' capitalism, bound by the 'rule of law', is the way forward for Ugandan society.

This view is not uncommon on the African continent, marred as it is by dictatorship, conflict, corruption and nepotism. This is especially the case amongst a layer of the middle class youth, university graduates and self-styled 'entrepreneurs' (small business people), who find their aspirations to a higher standard of living, and the enhanced social status that would come with it, blocked because of the economy's domination by a small politically-connected elite and imperialism.

Reflecting this, some of the more detailed sections of the NUP manifesto lay out plans for "youth small and medium enterprises", calling for greater access to start-up capital, assistance with business plans, cheap credit and the "protection of the borrower", tax-breaks etc., linked to local procurement, local content and some protection from foreign competition. Wine and the NUP sum-up their general economic policy in their manifesto, saying that, "To restore trust and confidence in our economy, we shall stabilise our business environment and render it more predictable by good governance that empowers the private sector to create jobs and stimulate growth." Unfortunately, this approach is a futile attempt to side-step the ruling class's and imperialism's strangle-hold on Ugandan society.

Social Contradictions

The inconsistencies and contradictions in Wine's manifesto reflect the contradictions in his social base, and the class contradictions of Ugandan society more widely. Without being conscious of these, Wine's mobilising slogans attempt to be "all things to all people", whilst his manifesto's details speak overwhelmingly to the interests of the Ugandan petty bourgeoisie and aspirant middle class.

Last week's elections however, confirmed that Wine's social base is in the cities amongst the urban poor and the 83% of 15-29 year-olds who are underemployed in informal and precarious jobs. Again, it is not uncommon in neo-colonial conditions for these social layers, desperate for an improvement in their dire living conditions, to propel forward any movement, or individual, capable of raising hopes for genuine change. However, atomised and unorganised, and in the absence of a conscious working class movement, this layer can become an unwitting footrest for the self-selected but more organised middle class 'cadre'.

The low-turnout, reported at 59%, notwithstanding the uncounted ballots and repression, does suggest limits to Wine's appeal at this stage. Crucially, the question of the working class. There is not a single mention of workers-wages, conditions of employment, or trade union rights in the NUP manifesto (except calling for an increase in teachers' wages which is raised in the context of guaranteeing the youth better education). It is as if the existence of the working class simply

did not occur to Wine!

However, there is a certain level of industrial development in Uganda, including mining, oil and steel, with industry accounting for 7% of employment, and a public sector employing 22%. Trade unions have a long history. The dominant National Organisation of Trade Unions (NOTU) claims an affiliated membership of nearly one million. This is a key social force, seemingly untapped by Wine, notwithstanding that in their latest statement, the NOTU leadership boast about signing an agreement with government accepting the necessity of job losses arising from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic!

Which way forward?

Wine's call to fight against corruption and for greater democracy and freedoms in Uganda is of course correct and should be supported. But Wine and the NUP are clear that they are not making a challenge to capitalism itself, only Uganda's undemocratic and corrupt crony-capitalism. However, without the overthrow of capitalism a genuinely free and democratic Uganda is a utopia.

It is significant that Wine has taken the movement he has inspired onto the political field. However, his reliance on deal-making and applying pressure for de facto re-shuffles within the official opposition, itself no less tied to the Ugandan status quo, whilst catapulting him forward initially, will quickly become a handicap. For example, how will the NUP select its parliamentary candidates? Will the 21 sitting MPs that have defected to it be allowed to stand again? How will new candidates be chosen? Unless the fresh layers in the People's Power Movement that have propelled Wine this far move into the NUP shell, and fight for a full debate on programme and the democratic control of the leadership and its elected representatives, the pro-capitalist petty bourgeois elements will be consolidated as the leadership and the masses left outside as voting fodder.

The developments in Uganda confirm that under capitalism, there is no way forward for the oppressed masses, the middle class and society as whole. Completely and utterly tied to, and dependent upon, imperialism, the political and economic elite's intolerance of even bourgeois parliamentary democracy is rooted in their complete incapacity to develop the country economically. The starting point for any serious struggle to break through the dead-end of a capitalist Uganda, which offers neither the youth, nor peasantry, or even small business any future, is understanding the necessity to link the struggle for social and democratic reforms to the socialist transformation of society. In this the role of the working class, the only social force with an interest in, and capacity to bring this about, is central. Despite its relatively small numerical size, its role in production and social weight makes it the decisive force in society.

These are some of the questions that young people, from whatever social background they come, who have been inspired by Bobi Wine and want to see the fundamental transformation of Uganda, urgently need to grapple with. The building of an organised and conscious socialist youth-grouping out of the People's Power Movement that sets itself the task of reaching organised workers and uniting with them would be an important first-step in ensuring that the hopes that have been raised by Bobi Wine can be made into a reality. The CWI is willing to discuss the ideas of socialism with the Ugandan youth and help develop clarity on the programme needed to transform their country, the Great Lakes region, Africa and, ultimately, the world.

Ten Years Since the 'Arab Spring' - Key Lessons for Socialists

The year 2011 began with mass protests spreading across the Middle East and North Africa which shook the ground beneath the feet of the region's many autocratic regimes. The decades-long dictators - Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt - who had appeared firmly entrenched, were swept out of power by magnificent movements of young people and workers.

The initial trigger was the tragedy of Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself alight in protest at his daily struggle for a living income and against police abuse. There followed an immense eruption of anger by working people and the poor, against poverty, inequality, corruption, repression and humiliation. In particular, high unemployment, low wages and the escalating cost of food and other basic goods fuelled the discontent. It was so universal across the region that the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were followed by uprisings in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria.

While the news of Mubarak's fall was being greeted by working people in Egypt and across the globe, members of the CWI were on the streets of Cairo with an Arabic language leaflet putting forward some important steps to consolidate the victory. It urged "no trust in the military chiefs and no participation in any government with leaders or officials of the Mubarak dictatorship". This was a key issue because the military leaders were moving quickly to take the helm, giving false assurances to the protesters that they would oversee the desired fundamental change.

The CWI leaflet fully supported the need to secure democratic rights, including political freedom and the right of trade unions to organise and take industrial action; and called for "trial before popular courts of all those involved in the Mubarak police regime's repression and corruption".

How could all this be done? By "urgent formation of democratic committees of action in the workplaces and neighbourhoods - particularly in working class and poor neighbourhoods - to co-ordinate the removal of all remnants of the old regime, maintain order and supplies and, most importantly, be the basis for a government of representatives of workers and the poor". Such a government would need to take the main industries and services into public ownership and break completely with capitalism - a system only offering a nightmare existence for much of humanity.

Moves to create local committees of activists were taking place, as were important steps forward in building independent trade unions. But these developments alone were not sufficient; also they were outpaced by the determined steps taken by the military leaders and other representatives of capitalism to re-secure their system.

History has shown that no capitalist class - whether its type of government and state rule is brutal or more benign - will simply hand power over to the majority in society when faced with rebellion. Without concrete steps to remove "all remnants of the old regime" as the CWI argued for, capitalist rule inevitably continued in Egypt and Tunisia with just changes of government and personnel being implemented at the top.



MASS PROTEST IN TAHIR SQUARE, CAIRO, EGYPT, 25 JANUARY 2012

With no mass workers' party in existence to offer an alternative, the Egyptian general election in 2012 led to the Muslim Brotherhood forming a capitalist government, headed by the Brotherhood's leader Mohamed Morsi that was never going to satisfy the demands of the revolution. After one year, following massive protest demonstrations, it was removed in a military coup, which paved the way for today's military-led, authoritarian regime headed by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Based on decaying capitalism, his regime has only delivered an even worse situation for working class and middle class people than existed under Mubarak.

Less than a quarter of Egyptians recently surveyed in a Guardian-YouGov poll said that their lives are better now than ten years ago. Fearful of the next revolution, al-Sisi has stepped up imprisonments and killings of people opposing the regime. But the titanic events of 2011 showed that when the majority in society rise up and fight back together - as conditions today are laying the basis for again - no amount of state force can hold them back.

In Tunisia too, life for most people hasn't improved over the last decade. The limited freedoms won by the 2011 revolution are being eroded, and protests have re-emerged against unemployment - at a higher rate now compared with 2010 - and declining living standards. Working class areas in Tunis, Tunisia's capital, and across the country, have seen an eruption of angry young people on the streets, against the backdrop of mass unemployment and crumbling services.

The hopes for fundamental change that drove the 2011 uprising have been destroyed by the failure of the numerous line-ups of capitalist government since then to solve any of the acute problems: poverty, corruption, regional disparities, terrorism and more. Not surprisingly, there are now mixed moods, with some expressing utter despair and thinking that democracy and stability aren't compatible.

Revolution and Counter-Revolution

As well as the shattered hopes in Egypt and Tunisia, counter-revolutionary developments over the last decade have included

the revolt in Bahrain being crushed with the aid of military force from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf regimes, and the terrible civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Libya. The interventions of various imperialist powers around the world, attempting to promote their own interests, have played a major role in worsening those wars. There were also the conquests by Isis, which although now largely reversed, have not eliminated the threat posed by its right-wing jihadism and terrorist methods.

However, the period since 2011 has also encompassed new protests and movements in the region. A tremendous revolutionary movement took place in Sudan in 2018-19 which led to the removal of President Omar al-Bashir. Nine days before his fall from power, president Bouteflika had been forced out of office in Algeria after an extensive protest movement swept across that country. Massive discontent erupted in Lebanon in 2019 and large-scale protests have been ongoing there, with the anger increased following the corruption and failings surrounding the terrible explosion in Beirut's port last August. A wave of working class revolt arose in Iran in 2018 and more struggles have taken place there since. In addition, smaller-scale movements have taken place in Iraq, Jordan and Morocco.

The term 'Arab Spring' was from the start only a short-hand expression because the 2011 revolts included non-Arab participants. Over the last decade, non-Arab struggles in the region have been added to, especially with the protests in Iran, a majority Persian country.

All the uprisings stem from the increasingly intolerable conditions endured by workers and the poor across the region, with the largely young-in-age populations facing virtually no prospect of securing a decent living. With the economies in crisis, living standards for the majority are being driven into the dirt, made worse by the elites' immense creaming-off of wealth, the austerity edicts of the International Monetary Fund, the effects of climate change, and now the added horror of lost jobs and lives due to Covid-19. So conditions for the mass of people are desperate and rage will continue to spill over into revolts and revolutions.

Achieving Change

One lesson learnt from the 2011 events that have been apparent since then in protesters' slogans, is that it's not enough to just remove a president or government. In Algeria, in Lebanon, in Iraq, demonstrators have called for the whole political elite and system to be removed. They have also rejected sectarian-based division. This was particularly the case in Lebanon.

Last year's formation of a military-dominated coalition government in Sudan after the old regime was overthrown illustrates the key issues that arise after a dictatorship is defeated. The burning questions that still need to be addressed across the region are: What can replace the present political systems, and how can it be achieved? This poses the need for mass political parties to be built that serves an opposite purpose to the pro-capitalist parties, that have complete independence from them, and that put forward a programme of removing not just the present political structures, but the system that underlies them: capitalism.

The class in society that can build and successfully lead such parties is the working class, as it has no interest as a class in the maintenance of capitalism. Also, as the main class under capitalism that produces goods and delivers services, it has the potential power – through general strike action – to bring the capitalist class to its knees.

It was common for activists during the 2011 uprisings to view the idea of building political parties as unattractive, because of the political and bureaucratic degeneration of left and workers' parties in previous periods. But the uprisings and revolutions over the last decade show the limits of spontaneous, disorganised movements, and the need for workers to organise well, industrially and politically, at the local, regional and national level.

To help guard against political degeneration, their organisations need structures that enable discussion and debate at all levels – and decision-making by elected representatives who are fully accountable to those who elect them. This means that rank-and-file members must be able to correct or recall their representatives at any time if they consider it necessary.

Alongside the need for mass workers' parties, preparation is needed for them to become armed with revolutionary socialist ideas, vital for unifying the movements around the common goal of real, fundamental change and democratically discussing and mapping out the steps needed to achieve it.

Plenty of guidance can be gained from studying past revolutions, from the 1871 Paris Commune (see p. 18-19) to the Russian revolution in 1917 which succeeded in overthrowing capitalism, and later revolutions during the 20th century: in China, Spain, Chile and Portugal, to name a few.

Important lessons from history include how to deal with capitalist states' military and security forces. In Egypt's 2011 revolution the army leaders found the rank-and-file soldiers to be unreliable for countering the protesters, as coming from working class backgrounds they were sympathetic to the calls made to support the movement. The CWI leaflet mentioned above advocated the formation of democratic rank-and-file committees in the armed forces and police to ensure the officers couldn't use those forces against the revolution.

Invaluable political and organisational guidance will also be learnt by reading and discussing Marxist writings, especially by Lenin, Trotsky, Engels and Marx himself, who all based their ideas on the Marxist analysis of capitalism and previous societies and on the workers' struggles during their lifetimes and before.

Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution' is highly relevant to the Middle East & North Africa region today, as it explains why the capitalist classes in the economically less developed countries cannot introduce the capitalist 'democracy' of the more developed countries.

A Marxist approach is also essential to avoid the serious error of left or workers' organisations advocating 'popular fronts' or alliances with pro-capitalists, in effect tail-ending them, as happened at times in both Egypt and Tunisia during the events of 2011-12.

On the contrary, it's essential that workers' movements stay independent of all capitalist interests and resolutely oppose them. The full force of the movements needs to be directed at bringing about genuinely democratic and revolutionary constituent assemblies, where representatives of workers, small farmers, young people and the poor can agree on a programme for the transformation of society on a socialist basis.

Only then will it be possible for the many million dreams of a better future to be turned into reality, and for the ordinary people of the region to share out the wealth and build new societies.

ANNIVERSARY 150 Years Since the Paris Commune

– The First Workers' Government

18 March is the anniversary of what is regarded as the start of “the 1871 Paris Commune as government”. An insurrection of workers took place to prevent the French army from seizing the cannons of the city’s National Guard. Arising from this event, the Paris Commune was formed. For the first time in history, the working class held power.

We republish below an article giving an overview of the Paris Commune that was written by Niall Mulholland in 2011. The 140th anniversary took place during the mass revolutionary struggles against dictatorships and poverty that swept North Africa and the Middle East.

The Paris Commune is a momentous historical event for Marxists, from which workers and youth can take many valuable lessons. This is no less the case today, as the masses face a brutal army coup in Myanmar, and opposition movements have taken place in recent months in various parts of the world, including Hong Kong, Chile, Belarus, India and Lebanon.

The Paris commune saw for a brief but heroic few weeks the working class take power for the first time. In the immortal words of Karl Marx, the masses “stormed heaven”. In extremely hazardous circumstances, Parisian workers attempted to re-organise society, to abolish exploitation and poverty, before falling beneath a vicious counter-revolution.

The background to the commune, as with the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, was war. Faced with economic decline and an increasingly militant labour movement, the desperate and corrupt regime of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte – the self-declared emperor of France – declared war on Prussia in July 1870. Battlefield defeats soon followed, leading to a revolt of the Paris masses. The new Third Republic was declared and a Provisional Government of National Defence (GND) established. The formation of the 200,000 strong National Guard meant that the Paris masses were now armed. The pro-capitalist ministers of the GND feared the potential for class conflict with these forces much more than the Prussian enemy.

A 135-day siege of the French capital by two Prussian armies, further big defeats for the French army and news that the GND was negotiating surrender terms with the Prussians led to a revolt by sections of workers and the national guard. Louis Auguste Blanqui, the veteran revolutionary, and his followers seized the Hotel de Ville on 31 October and set up a Committee of Public Safety. Blanqui had a strong influence amongst the Left and worker-activists in Paris and was respected for his courage. ‘Blanquism’, however, was a utopian socialist ideology, which argued that secret groups of conspirators could act as a substitute for the mass action of workers. The majority of workers were not yet ready to rise up against the GND and the insurrection was mistimed and isolated.



THE COMMUNARDS' BARRICADE

Class Struggle

The terrible siege of the city continued but so did the class struggle and state repression. In late January 1871, government troops fired on demonstrators outside the Hotel de Ville. Soon afterwards, the GND finally did what they had long planned and announced they were prepared to surrender to the Prussian military leader, Otto von Bismarck. The Prussians insisted on draconian concessions, including the loss of two territories, Alsace and East Lorraine, and huge war reparations.

Elections in February saw the reactionary Adolphe Thiers lead a new national assembly packed with monarchists and rural reactionaries. The assembly antagonised Parisian workers and small businessmen by threatening to cancel the wages of many national guards and demanding that rent arrears and all debts be paid immediately. This threat of bankruptcy, along with the danger of a monarchist restoration and Prussian reprisals, led to a new radicalisation amongst the poor and middle layers in society.

When a central committee of the Federation of the National Guards was democratically elected, Thiers decided to put an end to the emerging alternative government. He sent 20,000 French troops to capture the strategic canons at Montmartre, above the city. However, the troops disobeyed orders to shoot into large crowds of workers and executed two generals.

This was precisely the time for the National Guard to go on the offensive. Thiers and his government had fled from Paris to Versailles. The army was disintegrating along class lines. But the central committee, dominated by conservative, procrastinating figures and without a clear socialist programme and worked out tactics and strategy, failed to win over the retreating troops and to end resistance at Versailles.

The leaders of the National Guard organised elections for a

commune, based on universal male suffrage in each locality, which came into being on 26 March. The commune, or city municipality, recalled the commune formed during the French Revolution, in 1792, which was regarded as a body of popular control.

The members of the 1871 commune were elected and open to recall at any time. Nearly half of the elected members were skilled workers, while the others included radical middle class doctors, accountants and journalists. Karl Marx commented: "This was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative..." The 90-member commune was made up of various Left republicans, but also a significant number who were members of the International Workingmen's Association – the First International.

Proudhon

As well as Blanquists, there were followers of Pierre Joseph Proudhon. He argued against big business and called for small property ownership, for people's co-operatives and exchange banks. This way, workers would "acquire the means of production" and could operate in a "just market".

Within the First International, Karl Marx fought against Proudhon's anarchistic ideas and the illusion that capitalism could be overturned through reforms. Proudhon did not understand the historic role of the working class in abolishing capitalism – because of its size, strength and collective consciousness – and he rejected the democratic rule of the working class in the transition to socialism and a classless society.

Despite the limits and confusion of the commune leaders, far-reaching social and economic reforms were decreed. The conscript army was abolished and replaced with the national guard of armed citizens. Wages for commune members were limited to help prevent careerism and bureaucracy. The inherent internationalism of the communards was indicated by the popular slogan: "the flag of the Commune is the flag of the world Republic". Church and state were separated, religion would no longer be taught in schools, and church property was abolished.

Economic reforms included the abolition of workers' registration cards and night work for bakers. Pawnshops were closed down. Debts were cancelled for a period. Factories abandoned by their fleeing owners were to be taken over by workers' associations as co-operative societies. It was hoped to organise the workplaces into one "great union".

However, the revolution stopped halfway. Decisive sectors of the economy were left untouched. The commune leaders failed to nationalise the Bank of France. Nor did they introduce an eight-hour working day, as a first step to allow workers the time to begin to participate in the running of a new society.

As it was, the commune had little time to put its policies into practice. Terrified that revolution could spread throughout France and Europe, the French and Prussian ruling classes now united against their common enemy – working people in revolt. The French army laid siege to Paris with a continuous bombardment. Thiers faked a wish for negotiations to buy time to prepare for his final assault. Against this onslaught, the commune leaders underestimated the class enemy and adopted a defensive attitude.

Massacres

Following some heavy losses in early April, the French army, given free passage by the occupying Prussian army, finally entered Paris on 21 May. Eight days of terrible massacres ensued. Around 30,000 men, women and children were murdered, 38,000 were imprisoned, and up to 15,000 deported. Thiers was determined to destroy physically the most advanced sections of the working class and to wipe out the living memory of the commune.

Concerning the latter, Thiers and the capitalist ruling class failed completely. Marx and Friedrich Engels studied in great detail the dynamics of the commune – a "new point of departure of worldwide significance" – pointing out that the working class in coming to power could not rely on the capitalist state apparatus and that they would have to defeat it and create their own.

Lenin and Leon Trotsky, leaders of the successful 1917 Russian revolution, concluded that, above all else, the Paris commune failed because it lacked a revolutionary party of the working class. Such a party sinks deep roots amongst the working class and youth, and by studying the lessons of international movements, prepares in advance for the struggle for power.

Today, the working class is inestimably stronger in France, Europe and internationally than it was in 1871 or 1917. The overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 was accomplished with the decisive intervention of the working class (see p. 16-17). But these revolutions have, so far, met only part of their aims, without guaranteeing real, lasting democratic rights or winning fundamental economic and social change. [In the case of Egypt, reaction was able to bid its time and plan revenge, which was ultimately due to the lack of the alternative of a mass revolutionary party of the working class with a socialist programme that is prepared to not just take power but overthrow capitalism. The army was able to carry out a bloody counter-revolution, killing and imprisoning thousands, and the chief butcher of the masses, General Sisi, remains in power].

As with the heroic Paris commune, building mass, independent organisations of the working class, armed with socialist policies, is vital to realise the aspirations of working people in North Africa and the Middle East and across the world.



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