

Protests must draw class line

Service delivery protests in South Africa and international protests against the capitalist crisis must be understood using class analysis of the working class versus the capitalist class. Any other approach gives a distorted view, writes **Trevor Ngwane**.

South Africa is a capitalist society and capitalism is 'a mad and dreadful system ruled by inhumane, hypocritical parasites', writes Sandra Bloodworth, an Australian socialist. It is a system that breeds resistance and struggle. This observation is the starting point for my analysis of the increase in 'service delivery protests' in the country, and other protest actions in the world.

The South African working class's victory over apartheid has largely benefitted capital and sections of the middle class. Unemployment is high and so is poverty and inequality. This is why the struggle against oppression and exploitation continues.

Most people agree that the militant and sometimes violent protests waged by working-class communities in the country are a result of these harsh realities in the 'new, democratic and free' South Africa. But there is not enough emphasis on the class nature of these protests and the role they play in the unfolding class struggle.

Service delivery protests are an expression of the working class's struggle against the capitalist class. Bourgeois ideology hides this fact. Sometimes even Left analysts and activists fall into this trap largely

because they seem to have lost hope and confidence in the power of the working class to successfully challenge capitalism and replace it with a socialist system based on caring and sharing.

In the December/January issue of *Time* magazine it is suggested that the 'protester' is the 2011 Person of the Year because of the protests that took place in Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, Israel, Russia, Spain, Greece, England, the United States (US), Malawi, Nigeria, Swaziland, and other countries. The protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya successfully overthrew governments.

But for editors of *Time* magazine, and most middle-class political commentators, the protests are judged on a moral rather than a political plane. For them it is a struggle between good and evil, reason versus unreason, peacemakers versus warmongers. When the analysis is couched in political terms it is democracy versus dictatorship, good governance versus corruption, and the haves' against the have not's. Yet, none of all this is seen as expressing a class struggle.

In other words, it is assumed that capitalist rule will continue no matter what the protesters say or demand, and no matter the scale of

their struggle. There might be some improvements or changes in boss-worker relations, in the relationship of rulers to the ruled and in the unequal power relations that this implies, but in essence all this will continue.

Time notes that 'the protest vanguard... [is] disproportionately young, middle class and educated'. This is a clue to why the two-billion working-class people, the largest social group in the world and producers of social wealth, are written out of the historical equation. The middle class thinks and appears to be important but it is not a principal class under capitalism. Alone it cannot lead society in major historical change or provide an alternative way of running society, as it neither produces nor owns the means of production.

The future of society depends on the capitalist, the working class, and the struggle between them. During times of great class struggle the middle class always sides with one or the other of these two classes: the private owners of the wealth and those who produce it.

The capitalists rely on workers to work for them and on the middle class to spread their ideas about how society should be run in a way



Marching for free service delivery in Soweto.

that protects and promotes capital. The middle class are required to teach workers the core values of capitalism, namely, respect for private ownership of wealth and competitive individualism. The middle class are rewarded with more pay and a higher status in society.

Today the capitalist system is in great crisis, which began in 2008 when big banks went bankrupt in Europe and the US. Millions of people lost their savings, houses and jobs. We can call this a rolling global capitalist crisis. It is unstoppable, continues during periods of economic decline and growth, and moves from place to place. However, it changes its form, content and intensity as it spreads and capitalists have no solution but can only try to manage the crisis.

Capitalists force workers to pay for their crises through retrenchments and reducing wages. But this time the bosses cannot just do what they like. They are not strong enough to solve their crisis. Their attacks on the living standards of workers provoke resistance. In most countries the attempt to cut social spending through reducing health and welfare benefits and getting rid of the welfare state in Europe has led to more resistance.

In South Africa, there have been thousands of service delivery protests because of lack of services and the practice of forcing working class communities to pay for basic services such as water, electricity, housing and education. We can expect big general strikes in the near future as employed workers mobilise in response to the capitalist crisis.

Why is it the youth and the unemployed rather than organised workers in trade unions that are protesting in South Africa? Why is the middle class leading protests in other parts of the world?

To answer these questions we must not stray from consistently applying a working-class perspective. Firstly, specific conditions in each country and region shape how class struggles unfold. In South Africa, less than 20 years have passed since the fall of apartheid. Also, the Alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) formed during the struggle against apartheid continues to exist despite problems. The Alliance helps in calming the frustration of unionised workers.

In countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia we find dictatorial Islamic regimes that benefit from the sale of oil. In Europe, decades of bourgeois democracy and economic development subsidised by imperialism allowed significant political and economic gains by the working class and an increase of the middle class.

Secondly, the working class has failed to provide a solution to the capitalist crisis. There are protests but no decisive challenge to overthrowing capitalist rule. The capitalists also have no solution. It is a kind of stalemate because none of the classes is leading society out of the crisis.

Rosa Luxemburg famously said that humanity must choose

between socialism or barbarism. The future of capitalist society depends on how the class struggle plays itself out. In the hands of the bosses, the future is more crisis and barbarism. In the hands of workers, the future is a fundamentally different socialist society with no alienation, exploitation and oppression.

Meanwhile, the capitalists rely on middle class agents to safeguard their system. The absence of an immediate working-class alternative allows the middle-class to become more important than it is. It begins to demand more improvements in material situation and social status. The bosses have no choice but to meet these demands because they need the middle class to protect their threatened system.

The global economic crisis means that middle-class expansion is funded by increasing worker exploitation through job cuts, denial of benefits, outsourcing, casualisation, longer hours, and privatisation. Conditions of living are allowed to worsen in the form of an increase in shacks, urban slums, and the inadequate provision of services.

The middle-class demands cheap consumer goods, cars, and other commodities. This requires restructuring the production and use of resources. The demand for protein, more meat, can mean less production of staple foods needed by the working-class majority.

The middle class is not a secure class. None are secure given the anarchy of the capitalist system. Company bankruptcies mean an abrupt end to carefully built careers and bank collapses wipe out life savings. Crime, strikes, riots, protests and social turmoil makes it more anxious. Its fear and hatred of the mob extends to trade unions – the organised mob. It demands more police, law and order, jails, discipline and the intensification of exploitation of the working class in order to ensure social stability and



Soweto women lead a march.

to safeguard a way of life based on middle-class 'values' and 'hard work'.

Another section of the middle class prefers a form of social stability cemented by human rights, dignity, social justice and the rule of law. These are noble aims, but for middle-class social democrats it means they are the main actors, custodians and missionaries handing out these gifts to the 'poor' and 'unenlightened' masses, which puts them above the working class. They try to hide the class perspective by claiming that their approach is non-political, is not politics and does not serve the interests of any particular class, but benefits all in society. That is why they deny the existence of class struggle.

The working class is not recognised as a class but rather as individuals who need middle-class help and guidance. Some on the Left fall into this trap when they theoretically cut up the working class and reconstruct it as the poor,

homeless, jobless, landless, waterless, illiterate, hungry, and the sick. The agency of the working class and its organic capacity to change history that was first identified by Karl Marx is distorted, substituted, surrendered and denied. This is the significance of the idea of the 'protester' as the Person of the Year. The protester becomes the new revolutionary subject – not the working class.

WORKERS SOLIDARITY

A different view of service delivery protests is that, just like strikes at the workplace, they are waged by the youth and members of the working class pushed to struggle by the barbarism of capitalism. And just like the strikes, they are made possible by working-class solidarity in the struggle. Without solidarity there would be no strike or collective protest. Solidarity fights against the alienation and competitive individualism of

capitalism. Solidarity is caring, sharing and looking after each other in order to build the strength to defend and advance against capital.

Solidarity is grounded in how the working class survives under capitalism. It is found in grannies sharing their pensions with grandchildren; uncles helping nephews; and neighbours helping each other. It is then taken forward in mobilising for collective struggles. It is about sympathy, support and unity.

Above all, it is about strengthening the working class in its struggle for needs. No worker or group of workers can win the fight alone. Each struggle has to find strength in others. Striking workers need the solidarity of other employed workers, but in particular, of unemployed workers who have the power of refusing to scab and take the job of the workers on strike.

Similarly, the unemployed worker

and the youth fighting for essential services in the township cannot win alone. They need the solidarity of employed workers. The latter have more social weight because they are central in the production process and can shut the capitalist system by stopping production. During the struggle against apartheid the militant youth in the Vaal went to their employed parents to find the additional strength they needed to win against the regime. That was how the powerful 1984 stay-away happened.

Recently the people of Thembelihle, a shack settlement in Lenasia, south of Johannesburg, protested for a week but in the end called off their action as they realised that they needed solidarity - extra strength - from other members of the working class in order to win their demands. Their protest was militant, heroic and well-organised, but like the Vaal youth they realised that they could not win or struggle alone.

Many communities fighting for service delivery must learn this lesson because there is too much fragmentation and isolation of the struggles. Solidarity with other communities and with the trade unions must be organised. Bosses do not fight alone but they support each other. They have their state, money, the media and other social institutions that they can use to crush working class resistance. When you fight alone you can begin to think that the bosses are stronger and the working class is weak. Solidarity has been a central aspect of the vision of mobilised workers throughout history. It is also the condition for a working-class victory.

Workers face the challenge of learning or re-learning how to define their class enemy. The ANC was brought in directly from being banned, with some leaders straight from jail, to manage the capitalist state. This reflects both the power of the national liberation movement,

but also points to the tactics capitalists can use when defending their system. It can be argued that in a class war the ANC will and does stand on the other side of the class line. But many workers are still loyal to it and some will not let go of the hope that it stands on their side.

Moving forward means that this problem must be addressed head on. The protests and strikes open the door for workers to reconsider their loyalty to the ANC given its central role in maintaining the capitalist system. Active involvement in struggle and reflecting on their experience allows ordinary workers to know more about who they are, understand their capacity, class strength, what they are fighting for and who their class enemy is. But this process is not automatic and must contend with the interference of the capitalist class and the state.

In South Africa, Malawi, Egypt, India, Brazil, Italy, and all countries of the world, workers and radical sections of the middle class willing to learn from and be led by workers, will realise in the course of heightened struggle that there can be no real solution unless capitalist power is replaced by working-class power. Each worker will then see themselves as part of a class fighting a class war against

capitalism. Each struggle will be seen as aiming to build a new and different kind of society.

The capitalist system is an international system and can only be defeated by the solidarity of striking and protesting workers uniting across towns, villages, national borders and the seas. This is not an impossible prospect because solidarity is grounded in the truth of working-class life under capitalism. It has happened before when workers from all over the world supported the international anti-apartheid movement. There was a realisation that without worldwide solidarity there could be no real solution in South Africa. Today, in the context of a rolling global capitalist crisis, the protests can become a process of stirring up millions of ordinary working-class people to become agents of the change necessary to create a world without alienation, exploitation and oppression.

That is the only way the victory against apartheid can be rescued and turned into a meaningful success - again. ^{LB}

Trevor Ngwane is a member of the Socialist Group and used its documents and positions in writing this article.

