

# Cronin, Jim & decolonisation

In recent debates Jeremy Cronin and Irvin Jim have appeared to be serving different politics on the South African political landscape. While one is a state manager of the problems created by the capitalist crisis, the other is on the side of the poor and for the radical demands of the Freedom Charter, writes **Mbuyiseni Ndlozi**.

Irvin Jim, the general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), argues that a meaningful change in our country must address the question of 'property relations', which he claims - quite correctly - remain racialised. Jim also, perhaps somewhat provocatively, suggests that some who would have us believe that they truly seek a socialist revolution in South Africa are actually working hard (through positions in the state and organs of the working class, like the South African Communist Party (SACP) to put the working class to 'sleep'.

Recently, using Marxist-Leninist rigour, Jim publicly responded to the first deputy general secretary of the SACP, Jeremy Cronin - whom he labels 'Pope Jeremy the First'. This is most certainly a fierce war of words, between perhaps two of the leading Marxist voices within the Left of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) including the African National Congress (ANC), SACP, Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) etc. However, a war of words should not be misunderstood as a problem: fierce debates are well known in the MDM!



William Matlala

Numsa general secretary Irvin Jim.



*SACP first deputy general secretary Jeremy Cronin.*

The current debate between Jim and Cronin has many layers, some of which are perhaps concealed to my ordinary eye. For this reason I am somewhat reluctant to join the debate, but it seems possible that it can be lifted above both personalities, and if anything, it is for its qualitative meditations that I find myself attracted to join in. In the end, within the war of words and debate, lies a very serious ideological contestation – one that goes way back.

There is some truth in Jim's assertions about the pacifying role of communists and some other revolutionaries in the state when he says they have worked to put angry masses (impatient about the pace of transformation and in demand of revolution) to 'sleep'. The question is why do these SACP members, communists and some others, with whom we have been in the trenches challenging the countless anti-working-class policies like the neo-liberal

onslaught on the labour law regime created by the Growth Employment and Redistribution Programme (Gear). Why should they turn against such efforts when they enter government? Why is their role turned into providing a 'Left' rhetoric to an openly market-oriented neo-liberal onslaught on the working class?

As opposed to inferring that Cronin and others within the state do not want a revolution, I propose that they are managing the apparent contradictions against their 'best will'. I suggest that this is because of the 'inevitability of violence that comes with revolution'. In the current South African property arrangements such a revolution would mean a civil war expressed on racial lines, precisely because property remains – as Jim argues – racialised. It is defended on these terms by the current balance of forces within the state. Cronin and others are therefore,

perhaps 'understandably', afraid of taking us through such violence, which will be on racial terms: hence they prefer a gradual state-led reform.

Daily they are in desperate search of macro-economic alternatives that can change the lives of the poor, without being too offensive to white minority capitalist rule. The predicament they face is that real change does not seem perceivable without confronting the predominantly white property ownership factor. On the other hand white minority capitalist rule is committed to maintain its privilege, and resists any of its dismantling.

In the end the efforts of Cronin and others in the state result in a perpetual postponement of an inevitable violent outbreak. But the real unpredictable factor about revolution is not so much whether it is violent or not. Such a question is a theoretical mistake about the conceptual status of

violence. The worry of those who seek change should have to be what form such violence could take, not whether there should be any violence at all. Will it take the Tahrir Square festivals of grand protests, or will it be armed like the guerrilla wars of the decolonisation period. Even worse, will it take the directionless sporadic violence with no centre to hold it? These choices remain on the table for the real transformation of property relations in South Africa, in favour of the poor, to emerge.

The task of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) is to use the liberal democratic state to increase working-class power, particularly black people's grasp of property and quality working conditions. However, as Jim points out, at the moment this is not anywhere in the agenda of the current macro-economic frameworks and programmes of the South African government. Of everything Cronin may say, he can't deny this factor.

Since 1994, those who brought us Gear when criticised and exposed, resort to false ideological wars and insist on expelling and silencing those who call for urgency in implementing the Freedom Charter which remains the central contract that brings black nationalists and communists together. It is therefore on the basis of the Charter that we should assess the Tripartite Alliance, its objectives and how it works today.

If so assessed, it is no secret, that not a single demand of the Charter which has to do with property relations has been implemented or inserted in macro-economic frameworks post 1994. Further, one can't help but suspect that the real reason why the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) has been disbanded had nothing to do

with 'disrespect of leadership and consensus' or 'undermining democratic centralism,' but that the league wanted to advance – with whatever right or wrongful intention of their leadership – the demands, and specifically pertaining to property, of the Freedom Charter.

If the ANCYL was really disbanded for claimed reasons, imagine how many former ANCYL national executive committee members (NECs) would have met the same fate. Think of Peter Mokaba and the arms question; or Fikile Mbalula and the Zimbabwe question. It seems safe to assume that this NEC faced the worst form of discipline (or silencing) precisely because they were challenging the continuing racial configuration of property relations. To make matters worse, they even proposed a concrete programme of radically altering property relations without the ruling class (whites in particular) being compensated.

The reason, I argue, is because the ANCYL programme and plans would have (and do) threaten the legitimacy of the current government amongst white nations and white property owners. Thus, even if they (Cronin and others) would not like to, it forces them to sustain the 1994 empty peace that did not shift property relations and thus condemn the black people, Africans in particular, into a permanent waiting room at the emperor's palace.

If the NDR cannot shift property relations and increase working-class power within and through the liberal democratic state without resorting to violence, then it leaves no option but for a civil war to break. This war sadly, boils daily in the belly, bodies, homes and communities of workers and the poor people of this country.

This is one of, if not the central fear of the ruling class in South Africa: *the threat of civil war (or violence) on racial terms* unfortunate as it may be, and by default it follows that racial violence also remains the threatening factor of our current societal cohesion. And leaders of the working class (such as Jim) are dispersed, isolated or made inferior when they reject these state policies that do not alter the life of their constituencies.

Whether we think leaders such as Jim are good personalities or not, one cannot deny that they have the greatest legitimacy within the working class and that they articulate the demands of the poor. The poor know this, the state knows this, the ruling class knows this, and so does Jeremy Cronin.

#### STATE VIOLENCE

Moreover, each day on the picket lines, the struggles of the poor are increasingly met with state brutality, epitomised in the tragic cases of Andries Tatane or the Marikana workers. The state, as it always puts it, says it intended to act in the interest of the law as they kill through the police, yet the same laws do not know how to resolve the central grievance at play – property ownership. These state leaders do not seem to realise that their power is based on the legitimacy of the law, and so if the law only acts to crush the poor, but never advance their living conditions, it becomes illegitimate.

In the end, one is left with no option but to say that the post-apartheid liberal democratic law system (or dare I say, regime) – which is tasked to manage social contradictions (caused in this case, primarily, by colonisation and apartheid) – can seem neither to resolve these grievances nor to increase working-class power in property configurations. Then,

the very thing it tries to avert will happen – civil war and violence. Again, such violence it seems will, unfortunately, be directed primarily against white property owners.

If workers and the working-class should decide that ‘enough is enough’, that liberal democratic law is not resolving their central grievances and that Jim and Zwelinzima Vavi, Cosatu general secretary, should lead them in a war against private property, these leaders, acting as stewards of the workers, will have no choice but to act exactly as told. This is precisely what is beginning to happen! Jim or Vavi being slandered for representing worker views will not suffice.

Having closely observed the debate between Cronin and Jim, one senses that of all problems confronting us in this country, without sounding economic reductionist, unless there is seriousness in meeting the central demand of liberation (which is to decolonise property relations) then the NDR will always be undermined by Marxist show-off. Social cohesion and a really post-racial (non-racial) society should have to start with the socialisation of strategic property relations in favour of the colonised. If not, racial tensions are merely suspended and not resolved.

Marikana’s greatest lesson is that the state and capital are causing division within the organised working class, just like in the early 1990s when they managed to turn the ANC, Inkatha and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) against each other. As they did at the most crucial point of the struggle, when the unity of black resistance had won legitimacy everywhere in the world, they fragmented and turned it against itself. In the same way they want to weaken the unity of resistance by workers when capitalism is facing a global crisis

and thus a crisis of legitimacy.

The crisis reflects that bosses had lost moral standing as the best managers of social property, particularly at their individualised and private level. Many were clear that greed, disregard of law and order had characterised modern capitalist behaviour such that it collapsed the entire society into an economic drought.

It is at this crucial moment that property relations could have been shifted in favour of decolonisation: when workers could have taken advantage of the illegitimacy of capitalists and increased their power in relation to property ownership. Instead capital, assisted by the state and its police, managed to fragment the workers and shift the focus from a grievance of property relations to one of violence amongst the workers; and the state police.

This was cemented through the Marikana Commission of Enquiry which has adopted this idea of police brutality and workers feeding on each other as the main focus. In addition, liberal groups everywhere are now also calling on an enquiry into ‘police brutality’; not ‘business brutality’, which was the central point of Marikana!

Indeed, no one can deny that policing must be re-visited, but as evidence is appearing in the Marikana Commission, the style of policing changed precisely because of trying to prioritise crime. So, the platoons of Marikana were not trained in public gatherings management, but in crime prevention – shoot-to-kill-type of policing methods. This shift in forms of policing again goes back to the central grievance, even for the ordinary pick-pocketing criminal, which is rooted in ‘property relations’. For those with good memories, it was again liberal groupings, the Democratic Alliance in particular,

that had pushed government to prioritise crime prevention.

Not surprisingly, the Marikana Commission is similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its focus on acts of violence without turning to the underlying causes of social disintegration – the unfair property relations.

Jim, at least for the most part, drives us to the central concerns of decolonisation and the primary objective of the NDR. He cannot be termed ‘ill-disciplined’ and in the end it will not matter whether he understands Marxism or not, or whether he is familiar with the basic general theory of social change. Unless the liberal democratic state is used to further the NDR, as expressed in the Freedom Charter (in particular its economic demands and fair property relations) then something else should be used to achieve it.

Jim and others should choose, and do so soon enough. There is the progressive option of the old style Tahrir Square revolutionary politics which are prepared to meet violence. Starting another political forum like Mamphela Ramphele or another Congress of the People will not help.

Cronin and others in the state need not be fearful of a revolution. Jim on the other hand, need not hesitate. Occupations, stay-ways, and defiance campaigns can be the next festivals of the poor in this country where state and property systems can be fought, stopped and restarted on new terms of property relations: of the Freedom Charter and the poor. <sup>LB</sup>

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