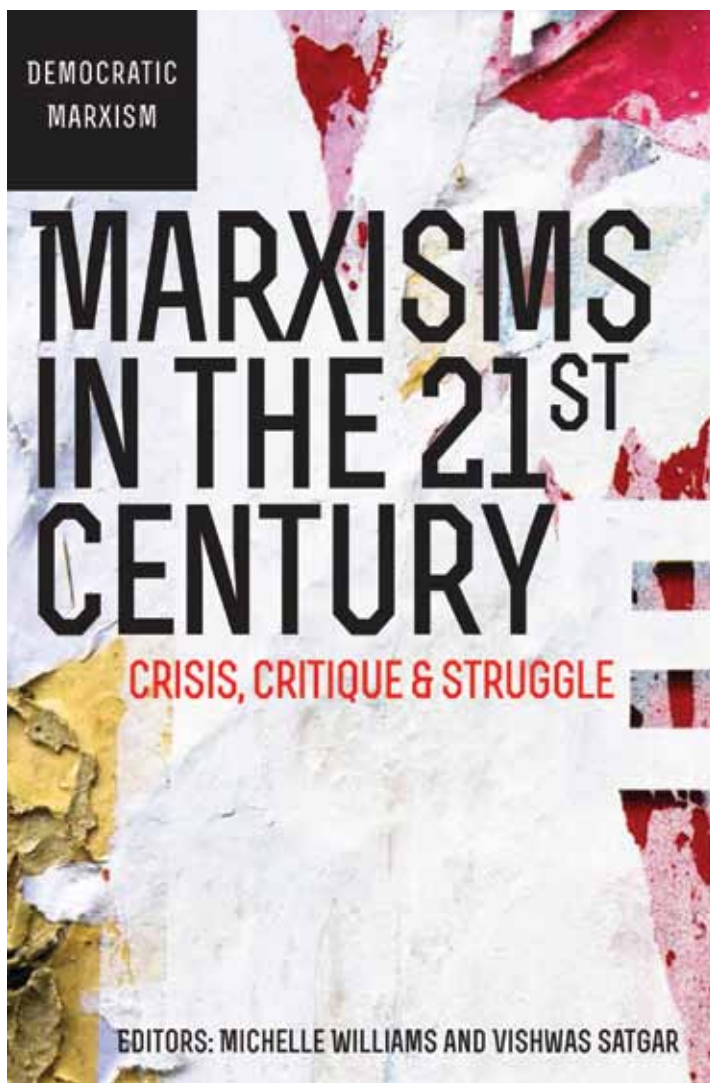


Democratic Marxism and the Numsa moment

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) moment challenges neo-liberal capitalism promoted by the African National Congress (ANC) and brings together organised working class and left forces against capital. It also provides an opportunity for renewal of Marxism in South Africa, writes **Vishwas Satgar**.



In the context of the deep crisis facing capitalism it is not surprising that Marxism, capitalism's dialectical other, has come to the fore. Marxism is like a ghost, a phantom, a subversive mole that will always be present as long as capitalism exists.

Marxism grew into a powerful political movement in the 20th century. Its inherent challenge to capitalism, through class struggle, gave rise to revolutionary socialism (with different variants: Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoists, Guevarists and so on), social democracy and revolutionary nationalism. These ideological class projects, when in power, constrained and challenged the expansion of liberal capitalism and imperialism. With the unravelling of the Stalinised Soviet Union and the turn to capitalism by China and Vietnam, Marxist inspired ideologies and movements have been further displaced.

Neo-liberal and financialised global capitalism, a class project of transnational capital, is dominant. The capitalist project of global restructuring is rolling back working-class gains, squeezing society, destroying nature and generally undermining the conditions that sustain life on planet earth. Even with the deepening capitalist crisis, the global ruling classes are unwilling to abandon the destructive policies of neo-liberal capitalism. Even after the global crisis of 2007/2008, it is still about more of the same through austerity, privatisation, export-led growth, financialisation (provision of credit, speculation and government borrowing) and cutting back costs, particularly labour costs to make more profits.

The triumph and destructive logic of neo-liberalised global capitalism is also present in South Africa and has been shaping our political economy for the past 20 years as part of ANC rule. It is in this context that the Numsa moment and process takes on a crucial political significance. The decisions made collectively by Numsa, at its Special National Congress in December 2013, demonstrates serious political will and an attempt by the organised working class to confront and reclaim the strategic initiative from capital and a globalised ANC state.

It is a bold attempt to fight back at the level of advancing a working-class led left alternative for South Africa. This is starkly reflected in its decisions to withhold its electoral support for the ANC, choosing to withdraw from the ANC-led Alliance, committing to win over the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) to its position, reaching out to progressive social forces through the building of a United Front and deciding to clarify its approach to the formation of a Workers' Party/Movement for Socialism over the next two years.

The Numsa moment also contains the potential of renewing Marxism by learning from the mistakes of historical Marxism, rethinking inherited practices and innovating in the new conditions of our time. It holds the prospect for a new and exciting Left politics led by workers but elaborated together with other progressive social forces.

CHALLENGES TO MARXISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The neo-liberal onslaught against the global working class and society has also undermined the presence of Marxism in everyday struggles and lived experiences. First, this has happened at the propagandistic level of a vulgar disdain for anyone who is Marxist or takes Marxist ideas seriously. Marxists have been declared irrelevant in the context

of the triumphalism of capitalism after the Cold War, through narratives like the 'end of history', 'there is no alternative', and 'we are all Americans'.

Second, a general defeatism has been declared through notions of the post-modern which rejects universal ideas, focuses on identity politics rather than building solidarity for working-class led politics and is preoccupied with the 'play of meaning'. Third, and ironically, vulgar and dogmatic Marxism has also played into de-legitimising Marxism. Starry-eyed and ultra-militant Marxists with a bent for doctrine, formulas and Marxism as theology have further pushed Marxism to the margins.

However, the biggest challenge to the prospects and place of Marxism in Left politics lies in the challenging question that all Marxists have to ask themselves: Does Marxism lead to political betrayals or tyranny? The question is necessitated by two issues, for which we must take responsibility. First, the historical experiences of Marxism in the 20th century produced betrayals of the working-class and tyranny.

Social democracy, revolutionary nationalism, and revolutionary socialism ultimately surrendered to neo-liberalism, betraying a working-class project of social transformation. Internal to all these class projects were different extremes of violent oppression that contributed to undermining these projects. Violence and oppression in the name of Marxist projects have often been rationalised and justified with different political arguments. Some have argued the constant threat of imperialism and counter-revolution justified these excesses, others point to the challenge of advancing transformation in 'backward and poor' societies, some have argued that the power of capital necessitates measures to discipline the working class and others

have pointed to weak analyses, leadership and strategy.

In the end, these arguments – for example, communist and social democratic parties, national liberation movements, charismatic leaders, party bureaucrats, state technocrats and planners – displacing the working class in the name of change. It is these vanguards that turned on the working class while claiming to be advancing change in the interests of workers. Hence an emancipatory Marxism in the 21st century has to go beyond vanguardist Marxist conceptions of politics. It has to find its strength and dynamism, first and foremost, amongst workers themselves.

The second issue is the deficiencies in Marx's own understandings of democracy, developed in the 19th century. While Marx celebrated the importance of participatory democracy, expressed through the Paris Commune, this is not an adequate conception of democracy for the world we live in. Participatory democracy is crucial and has to be the starting point but we also have to think with and go beyond Marx to appreciate other dimensions of democracy in both the political and economic spheres (for example, representative, direct, and associational democracies as well as democratic rights) that are important.

The achievement of these dimensions of democracy have been part of people's struggles that have happened over the past 500 years. For example, Marx would have supported the black and African working class, in particular, having the franchise and democratic rights in South Africa. In short, more democracy, grounded in participatory logics from below, is what is required to ensure a Marxist inspired politics is an emancipatory challenge to capitalism. This is even more urgent given that neo-liberal or market democracy is about limiting democracy.

DEMOCRATIC MARXISM PROJECT

The Democratic Marxism project confronts the challenges facing Marxism in the 21st Century. The first book in the Democratic Marxism series titled: *Marxisms in the 21st Century - Crisis, Critique and Struggle* has been published with a range of contributors inspired by the need to ensure Marxism draws on its critical categories to understand contemporary capitalism, engages in a conversation with non-Marxist currents of anti-capitalism (derived from radical ecology or feminism) and highlights new democratic left transformative practices. The Democratic Marxism project challenges the ossified dogmas of historical Marxism as a way of contributing to a renewal of left politics. However, this does not mean developing a 'school of thought' or reducing intellectual production to the work of an ideologue.

Instead, Democratic Marxism seeks to profile the ideas and perspectives of grassroots movements (such as unions, social movements and progressive campaigns), activists and progressive academics committed to a post-vanguardist, post-neoliberal and post-national liberation left project both in South Africa and beyond. It celebrates plural perspectives on shared concerns and objectives, while also learning from tensions and differences. Most importantly it reconnects Marxism with 21st century struggles, questions and ways forward. In short, the Democratic Marxism project does not claim to have all the answers but would attempt through its contributions to engender left values (such as tolerance, democratic debate, collective learning) as the basis for political engagement, while attempting to surface crucial signposts for democratic and collective consideration in the struggle.

COMMON GROUND

There are various faces and voices inside the militancy of Numsa. Some represent the revolutionary socialists in the Marxist-Leninist vanguardist

mould, others revolutionary nationalists, militant workerists, social democrats and democratic eco-socialists. Underpinning and guiding this are two important dynamics: (1) a union committed to worker control and collective intellectual practice and (2) a political commitment to seek convergence with the wider Left and progressive sections of South African society. This opens a way for Numsa to share common ground with Democratic Marxism.

In this regard there are four crucial areas of convergence. First, thinking critically about the crises of capitalism, its dynamics, tendencies and consequences for the working class including the precariat, the permanently unemployed, the landless poor and progressive strata of the middle class. Second, recognising that the oppressions of capitalism are not only expressed through exploitation and commodification but that there are other dynamics within capitalism that engender oppressions related to race, the destruction of nature, gender, sexual orientation and cultural alienation, including national chauvinism.

The intersections between these oppressions and class have to be explored as part of developing a new understanding of the South African social formation. This will also assist in understanding how capitalism today is seeking to reproduce its power over society, divide workers and contribute to a rift between workers and society. Hence workers have to be at the forefront of challenging the multiple oppressions of globalising capitalism. Third, they converge in seeking transformative alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism, including advancing a renewal of socialism that is deeply democratic, ecological, feminist and generally open to challenging the oppressions of contemporary capitalism. Fourth, there is convergence in thinking about strategic transformative political practice to build solidarity (domestically and internationally) and advance a left project in South Africa.

SIGNIFICANCE

The Numsa moment is part of the cycle of global struggle against neo-liberal capitalism and the renewal of resistance in South Africa since 2008 and especially in the Marikana conjuncture (2012 onwards). It emerges in the context of a new transnational activism, the emergence of a post-neoliberal institutional Left (like in Latin America and parts of Europe), mass based street politics in various countries (Greece, Spain and Brazil) and democratic revolutions that are confronting state power and disrupting neo-liberal control. The Numsa moment is also expressive of a renewed resistance to ANC-led neo-liberalisation in the context of the Marikana conjuncture. Such a conjuncture is marked by the realignment of class and popular forces emerging from the tragic massacre of 36 mineworkers by the ANC state on 16 August 2012. However, beyond situating the Numsa moment it has to also be recognised as a fundamental challenge to ANC-led national liberation politics.

In the first instance, it expresses a rejection of petty bourgeois nationalist leadership of workers and affirms a working-class assertion of identity, interests and political power.

Second, it turns its back on or rejects the ethical shortcomings and bankrupt politics and ideology of the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP). It affirms that the Zuma project of the SACP leadership (and the SACP's opportunistic co-option into the ANC) has been a disaster for the country and the working class.

The Zuma project has become indefensible as it has become mired in more corruption, rolling back democratic gains and continuing neo-liberal globalisation.

Third, there is an attempt to revisit the nature of labour production politics. This entails rethinking the idea of elite corporatist deal making through the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac), and instead affirming worker control, class struggle driven

engagements and a workplace-community alliance.

Fourth, the Numsa moment represents a left break in the Alliance. At this stage it is more than an electoral project such as the liberal Congress of the People (Cope) or the lumpen nationalist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Through its rolling programme of mass action against ANC-led neo-liberal policies, the building of a United Front and research about left alternatives, it is laying the basis for a new strategic left politics, with the potential to be counter-hegemonic or transformative on various fronts.

CHALLENGES

The Numsa moment is the boldest, most hopeful and definitely a very inspiring development in post-apartheid South Africa. It is more than a set of congress resolutions, but is also a process around a strategic left initiative, led by the most organised formation of the South African Left. It is emergent and will be prone to making mistakes, experiencing setbacks and facing difficulties. However, with Numsa taking forward its resolutions through a Resistance Expo involving various social movements and embarking on a general strike on 19 March, to start galvanising a United Front of resistance and solidarity, it has broken important ground.

However, at this early stage there are three important challenges that the Numsa-led convergence has to deal with. First, it has to go beyond switching the emergent United Front on and off, based on Numsa programmes. It has to deepen the organic links between community and workplace struggles as part of a new politics of solidarity. This means Numsa cannot just be the recipient of solidarity but has to also show genuine solidarity with left and social forces converging with it. This would also entail building capacity and laying a principled basis for engagement and decision-making to be institutionalised, in coming months,

inside the evolving United Front. Such a maturing of the process should also be done in a manner that protects the Numsa process from opportunistic and divisive forces.

Second, and flowing from the previous point, is that Numsa should not narrow its conception of its political project to being about constituting an SACP II. While there are Marxist-Leninist residues and reflexes in some quarters in Numsa, this tendency tends to get lost in trying to upstage the SACP and trading 'Marxist-Leninist truths' with it, rather than focusing its energy on advancing its own

ensure the Numsa moment and process does not merely end up in narrow electoralism but has the strategic elements for a new left mass politics that drives transformation from below. Such strategic elements could include: (1) deepening resistance to the oppressions of capitalism; (2) defending, claiming and constituting democratic rights; (3) advancing values centred anti-capitalist alternatives from below; and (4) building international solidarity in Africa and beyond.

In short, the electoral tactic in the Numsa process should merely be used to further strengthen the realisation of



EFF was visible during the Numsa strike.

project. Put differently, there is no need to continue flogging a dead horse. At the same time, if such an unreconstructed Marxist-Leninist or Stalinist tendency comes to dominate the Numsa process then it will end up instrumentalising social forces and would limit the prospects of left renewal inside the Numsa moment.

Finally, the Numsa process has to give more thought to building a political instrument. This means the process of building a political instrument has to be grounded in a deeper understanding of transformative political strategy, to

alternatives initiated from below, while democratising and transforming state power. In short, a new left political instrument must derive from transformative political strategy such that it has the form, capacities and practices to facilitate a fundamental shift in the balance of class and popular power beyond neo-liberal capitalism. ■

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