

Reply to: 'the end of innocence'

Mckinley's article (The end of 'innocence': the alliance and the left, *SA Labour Bulletin* vol 24 no 5, October 2000)

cannot go unchallenged. This is done not because McKinley's views are profound, but because it is necessary to expose the shallowness of his main arguments. If anything this article shows precisely why it was indeed correct to expel him from the SACP.

In retrospect, McKinley's joining of the SACP was not an act of commitment to the goals and ideals of the SACP, but classic ultra-left entryism to try and influence existing organisations towards their narrow and political self-interests. The ultra-left has always done this precisely because it knows it cannot stand on its own and build its own strong organisation and influence amongst the masses. This is because the ultra-left does not and has never had a concrete political programme to offer to the working class anywhere in the world, not least in our own country.

McKinley's article claims that yesterday's freedom fighters have been transformed into 'today's ideological and organisational gatekeepers' leaving the 'liberation movement increasingly dominated by members who are organisationally cowed, ideologically confused and politically unprincipled'. McKinley needs to be truthful. He in fact has never believed that the ANC, as leader

Simiso Nkwanyana responds to an article by Dale McKinley, published in vol 24 no 5.

of the liberation movement, has ever been a revolutionary organisation at any stage of its history, as is shown in his doctoral thesis and book on the ANC.

It is therefore disingenuous for him to write in his article as if the ANC, according to him, has just been transformed only now into a 'sell-out' organisation. One can only sense that this contradiction reflects an attempt to justify his seven-year flirtation with the SACP, an organisation allied to the ANC. McKinley has yet to clarify why he joined an organisation allied to a 'petty bourgeois, reactionary organisation'. The only plausible reason is entryism.

The fact that the ANC is historically frozen in the minds of the ultra-left is the most obvious ideological and intellectual cul-de-sac of the likes of McKinley. To adopt such a position is thoroughly ahistorical, unrevolutionary and undialectical. This reveals the moribund nature of ultra-left politics which approaches politics purely from an 'opponentist' stance irrespective of the issues at hand. Interestingly enough the thrust of this opponentist stance is not

against the capitalist class and its political representatives but the ANC and the alliance.

Denying the national question

Underlying the type of politics and attitude of the likes of McKinley is fundamentally the denial of the centrality of the national question in our revolution, and the need to organise in such a manner that this is tackled. It is an un-Marxist denial of the national question as a reality in our country. In fact, in our circumstances the very class struggle that the likes of McKinley retort about has essentially to be fought on a terrain of fighting gender inequality, racism and the struggle for the resolution of the national question. Whilst the language used by the likes of McKinley might sound different and revolutionary, it is essentially the recycling of the same old ultra-left, workerist arguments which have never inspired our working class nor taken our struggle beyond the intellectual idiosyncrasies of these highly factionalist

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Unless one has a proper grasp of the centrality of the national question in the very class struggle of the working class, the ANC becomes an unimportant

organisation which can only be characterised as a 'sell-out' organisation. In fact, as Lenin always reminded us, those who are looking for a pure class struggle, unconnected to the national realities within which it is waged, will never live to see it. Instead they will marginalise themselves and in the process become the worst enemies of the working class.

It is well worth reminding these forces that the importance of the national question is not only in relation to 'petty bourgeois nationalist forces', but that national oppression and its legacy is a living reality for the overwhelming majority of our people - the black working class. To deny the importance and material reality of racism, gender oppression and the national dynamic for the working class is precisely to fail to understand the class struggle in our context.

Alliances

McKinley's contradictory stance is confirmed in his own article that his biggest political bugbear is the unity of the alliance, which he holds responsible for 'weakening' the working class: 'The glue that has held the working class forces in check' has been the constant propagation of the need for 'unity within the alliance'. Is this not an interesting revelation? Was McKinley in the SACP in order to break the alliance, in direct contradiction to the policies of the SACP? And thus he had no principled commitment to the SACP and its programme in the first place. Why is he not taking his expulsion as 'freedom' to break out of the alliance that he does not believe in rather than blaming the SACP? Why would a 'revolutionary communist' be in an organisation pursuing unity with 'reactionary allies'?

Related to this is the failure of McKinley to grasp the necessity and the nature of

the alliances that the working class needs to forge in the current period. No working class struggle has ever been won without this class forging a revolutionary alliance with other progressive class forces. McKinley's argument reflects a failure to understand the dialectical relationship between the working class struggle and the need for alliances. To him there is an irreconcilable contradiction between waging a working class struggle for socialism and the forging of alliances with potentially progressive class forces other than the working class. Most importantly, in any alliance, precisely because it involves class forces other than the working class, there are bound to be tensions, contradictions and even contestations about the direction of the transformation struggles. True revolutionaries understand that the existence of such contradictions is inevitable and are no reason to want to flee such alliances. Rather the task of working class

revolutionaries is to assert working class hegemony in the context of such alliances. It is indeed possible that at particular moments in time the working class might not be hegemonic. But that is precisely the task and challenge of the working class to build its forces in order to assert its hegemony within such alliances. McKinley, like the rest of mostly defunct ultra-left in South Africa, believes that there is no need for alliances at all. This is the most infantile of ultra-left politics.

Working class struggles now

Turning to the question of the working class struggles in the current period, McKinley asserts that Gear has become a non-debate and that the working class has



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been completely sidelined by advocates of this policy. What characterises McKinley's entire article is a kind of male intellectual arrogance that what is not in line with his highly sectarian view does not constitute working class struggles.

It is simply a lie that Gear is now 'firmly embedded in the realm of non-debate'. The SACP's strategy conference dealt with this question extensively, arguing that the task of the SACP and all progressive forces is to take forward the economic debate by locating it within the struggle for the development of an overarching and co-ordinated industrial strategy. One of the resolutions of that conference was that any macroeconomic policy has to be aligned to an industrial strategy, and that is

how we need to take forward the economic debate in the alliance. Similarly the ANC's National General Council took an important resolution to the effect that macroeconomic stability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for economic growth and development. The COSATU congress reaffirmed its position on Gear and adopted a far-reaching resolution on an industrial policy as a basis upon which we need to review the current macroeconomic policy. For the SACP this provides an important platform and context within which to pursue the economic debate, without abandoning our critique of Gear. It is only those who are on the political wilderness like McKinley who can claim that Gear has become a

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non-debate.

Anyone who is awake to South African politics will realise the extent to which the working class has taken up struggles to assert its own interests this year compared to any other period in the recent past. This year opened with massive struggles by COSATU around job losses and for job creation, culminating in massive May Day rallies and a general strike on 10 May 2000. These struggles were critical in repositioning the working class and sending a clear message that the organised workers of this country will not take the negative effects of economic restructuring lying down. For McKinley these struggles are not

important since he regards them as a sop to the working class, but also because he plays no practical role in the revolution. This is typical of his ilk, who instead of throwing their weight behind these struggles will instead, from the comforts of their desks, see all sorts of conspiracies by the working class against itself.

In addition, the SACP has embarked on its second Red October campaign, marked by highly successful national marches and pickets throughout our country to demand the transformation of the banking sector. These struggles are essentially challenging the core of modern global capitalism - the financial sector - and are an important basis for the creation of a public and socialised financial sector. The COSATU job losses campaign and the SACP's financial sector campaign are essentially about asserting working class hegemony in socioeconomic transformation and are the very 'class reference point for socioeconomic transformation' that McKinley purports to believe in. One really wonders which working class has been sidelined in the current period, unless he is talking about the abstract working class in his head and not South Africa's black working class. The working class in South Africa has embarked on these struggles precisely because it understands that the working class struggle can never be advanced through armchair dissent and debating lists but through concrete struggles taking up issues affecting the overwhelming majority of our people.

Lack of confidence

What runs through all of McKinley's writings is a startling lack of confidence in South Africa's working class, which is not unrelated to the failure of his ilk to understand the real challenges facing the working class today. It is also a consequence



The working class needs to build alliances in the current period.

of his dogmatism and arrogance.

Apparently only he can guide and lead the 'dumb masses' who cannot think for themselves. In his article McKinley makes the argument that 'It is partly the ANC leadership's "success" in marketing its narrow class interests' as those of the South African working class that has led to the present state of rotteness in the alliance'. There can be no more an insult to South Africa's working class than the assertion that it has been duped and fooled into an agenda hostile to its own interests.

These kinds of assertions are to be found throughout his article. For example he further argues that 'much of the alliance's constituency have become numbed by the sheer intensity of what appear to be the unshakeable "headlights" of the liberation movement'. Later on he argues that 'Not surprisingly, organised workers, and to a lesser extent others on the left, are now grappling with the resultant political and organisational confusion as to where their class interests lie'. Really? Are organised workers in South Africa so confused about where their class interests lie or is it McKinley's own

confusion about where real working class interests lie? In essence what McKinley does in his article is to equate correct working class politics with his own 'freelance' and personal views, and that is why the article is actually about his own expulsion, which he equates with almost the death of 'revolutionary' politics in our party.

McKinley's expulsion

Ironically, one positive thing about McKinley's article is that it is the best motivation ever for why he had to be expelled from the SACP. He claims that he was expelled for writing articles in his capacity as a 'freelance journalist', thus projecting his expulsion as the suppression of freedom of expression. Any dedicated and truly revolutionary communist would know that protection of one's organisation is of paramount importance. You cannot be a 'freelance journalist' today and be a communist tomorrow, particularly where one uses the former position to attack one's own organisation, without any structured mandate. He argues that if we were

elected to represent working class interests it then is impossible to comprehend why he was expelled. Apart from this obvious arrogance that he personifies the interests of the working class and the socialist struggle in our country, McKinley needs to be reminded that the central committee was also elected to protect the SACP from being abused by people who pursue 'freelance, idiosyncratic' interests at the expense of basic policies and programmes of our party. We are a communist party that seeks to represent the political interests of the working class and not some kind of 'freelance' debating society formed to protect individual fantasies even if they contradict our policies.

Attacking everybody else

The shallowness and essentially anti-working class nature of ultra-left and McKinley's politics, despite claims to the contrary, is best illustrated by what he characterises as the 'new left resistance'. One would have expected some contribution to a serious discussion on strategy and tactics for the left, but what does McKinley give us? This task is reduced to three issues for him.

Firstly, 'the political and organisational challenges that have confronted the SACP and COSATU have stemmed directly from the ANC leadership's systematic institutionalisation of a deracialised capitalism', so he tells us. He continues to tell us that robust criticism of the ANC and alliance leaderships constitute 'essential revolutionary work'. In other words, the organisational and political challenges facing the party and COSATU is the ANC and its own alliance and not the capitalist, racial and gender character of South African society.

Not a single word is said in this article about how to concretely mobilise the working class for taking forward the

national, gender and class struggles in the current period. Not a single word is said about the balance of class forces and the challenges these pose for our revolution.

Thirdly, the rest of the article identifies the key 'revolutionary' task of his 'new left', as the struggle for 'critical dissent', not against capitalism, racism and gender oppression, but dissent against the alliance. If these are the revolutionary tasks of the left, McKinley's left might as well fold up even before it starts. Indeed it is necessary to critically reflect on the alliance and its programme and policy, but surely this cannot be the primary task and platform on which to advance the working class struggle in the current period. Instead McKinley's 'revolution' has precisely the same content as the right-wing and neo-liberal programme which is actively pursuing an agenda for breaking the alliance by turning allies against each other.

According to McKinley the main enemy is no longer capitalism, but the alliance leadership. The key challenges of our revolution are no longer the struggle to defeat the legacy of national oppression and struggle for gender equality, but it is now a struggle to turn the left into a debating society based on the paradigm of 'critical dissent'.

No wonder this kind of struggle is only found in the very political wilderness that McKinley has decided to join. In the end the danger of such politics is that practically capitalism, national and gender oppression are left untouched as they do not feature in the strategic considerations and 'revolutionary' programme of the likes of McKinley. What a wonderful 'freelance' service to the capitalist class and its political representatives! Surely Harry Oppenheimer must be smiling in his grave. ★

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