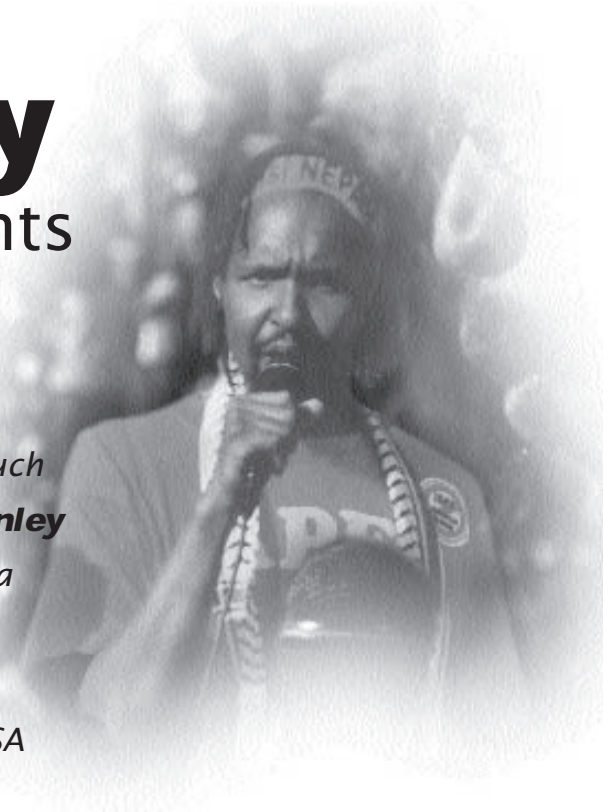


Democracy and social movements in SA

*The debate around the role of social movements in an emerging democracy such as South Africa continues. Dale T. McKinley responds to some of the issues raised in a previous edition of the **Labour Bulletin**, which began to explore who and what constitutes social movements are in the SA context.*



Ever since the ANC's political and public relations debacle at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in August 2002, there has been a consistent effort by ANC politicians and commentators to publicly attack, delegitimise and misrepresent the character and content of social movement struggles in South Africa. Michael Sachs' article in the *SA Labour Bulletin* 27(6) ('We don't want the fucking vote': Social movements and demagogues in South Africa's young democracy) is simply the latest example. What makes Sachs' article worse is his crass misunderstanding of, and thus subsequent misrepresentation of, democracy itself (and as specifically applied to South Africa) that he then uses to frame a misplaced assault on

(the majority of) South Africa's emergent social movements.

Democracy and the state under capitalism

The starting point for any meaningful understanding of, and practical engagement with, democracy, is a theoretical base. In Sachs' article there is a complete absence of any such theory of democracy that can then inform an analysis of the social and political actors within a democratic context. The result is that Sachs adopts a de-theorised and de-contextualised focus on 'representative democracy' as if this is the sole starting point for addressing contemporary South African political economy.

Sachs makes the mistake of

conceptualising democracy outside of its historical base, as some kind of neutral principle floating somewhere outside material relations. In turn, this leads to the concept of class and the practice of class struggle being understood solely in relation to the dominant institutional form of democracy under contemporary capitalism (ie, representative democracy).

Sachs' theoretical misrepresentation of democracy under capitalism leads him to focus on existing institutions of representation as the axis upon which any meaningful social and political activity turns. His core argument thus revolves around the need for social movements to accept, and participate in, the institutional 'democratic'

framework (what he calls 'institutionalised politics') as the best means to impact on, and change, society – or as Sachs would have it, to 'contribute to a fairer world'.

Not surprisingly, the heart of this argument is fundamentally consistent with the classic bourgeois liberal notion of institutionalised pluralism (ie, varying organisational forms) being the essence of democracy regardless of the dominant social relations within which such pluralism is rooted and operates. The problem here is obvious though. Pluralism simply becomes a catchword for a range of organisational and individual voices that are contained and limited within the narrow confines of a liberal bourgeois democracy that provides little in the way of seriously contesting the politics of a capitalist state.

Regardless of the institutionalised pluralism that has accompanied political democratisation since 1994, the South African state remains a capitalist state (even if a deracialised one). Those social forces that remain oppressed and exploited under the 'guidance' of such a capitalist state, thus have every reason to practise their politics predominately outside of its institutional boundaries, and that can also include electoral processes.

Certainly the South African state has, and will continue, to play a role that is not necessarily always in line with the highest expectations and demands of corporate capital – it will no doubt, for example, continue to play a part-time welfarist role that tries to smooth over class conflict and struggle. However, while capitalist relations remain the driving force in society the state will always reflect those dominant relations in the most specific of ways. Sachs' classless analysis of democracy and the South African state that presides over it, leads directly to the kind of

acceptable 'institutional politics' that most social movements want to avoid, and transcend.

If, as a majority of the South African social movements do, we understand contemporary politics under capitalism as the continuing practice of class struggle, then we can also understand why the existing state and its institutionalised politics are seen as a central target of that practice. The democratic content of that practice that is so worrying to Sachs, cannot be imposed – those struggling to create new avenues of political expression and to free themselves from the shackles of capitalist oppression will create it.

Representation and social transformation

Sachs' focus on 'representative democracy' as the basis, on which the organisational path and practical activities of the social movements should be adjudged, is entirely misplaced. It is not, as he would have us believe, representative democracy that has seen a 'flowering' of social movements. Rather, it has been the push for more inclusive and meaningful forms of direct and participatory democracy, that have little to do with the institutional forms of representation within bourgeois 'democratic' society, which provides the background to the rise of social movements in South Africa.

Sachs' contention that those movements that, 'position themselves in opposition to representative democracy will remain marginal to the process of social transformation', is even more off the mark.

It is this self-constructed and uncritical acceptance of the political primacy of representative institutionalism that then leads Sachs to ask outdated questions such as – 'how can the relationship between social



movements and institutionalised politics contribute to a fairer world?' Indeed, the entire question is framed as if all socialists, progressives and anti-capitalist militants have simply accepted the representational boundaries of the existing institutional (capitalist) order and thus, that the struggle for democracy is simply about finding the best way to fit into that order while lessening its impact on the poor/workers. It's the same tired old tune that has been discussed for decades amongst so-called progressives. And, what has been the result? More inequality, more oppression, more poverty, less freedom and certainly a less fair world.

When class/political struggle under capitalism is pre-framed (as Sachs does) as one in which there are no other strategic and tactical choices other than to work within the representational boundaries of capitalist 'democratic' institutions, then revolutionary class struggles against capitalism are being



effectively made impossible. Here, there is absolutely no room to view and practise 'engagement' with such institutions, from a perspective of independent and anti-capitalist class politics and struggle.

It is not that South African social movement activists (as Sachs so easily claims) see every democratic institution as 'dangerous mechanisms for the co-option of the poor' or view the vote as 'meaningless'. Rather, it is simply a matter of understanding that a reliance on formalised participation in such institutions, that includes participation in electoral politics, is inherently incapable of fundamentally transforming social relations. Unlike Sachs, social movement activists have no illusions in the revolutionary value of such institutions, whether or not the former liberation movement occupies a dominant position within them.

This has not meant however, that various social movements have been unwilling to utilise the vote as a tactical

means to put forward alternative positions, to expose the real agenda of the ruling class and most importantly, to mobilise the poor outside of the institutional framework of the mechanisms of their own oppression.

Sachs exposes his own limited understanding of capitalist economic and social relations when he states that, 'voting is definitely not the last act of popular democracy but it is the first'. The first act of popular democracy is the collective expression, through various forms of base struggles, of the desire for fundamental change in the lives of both oppressed individuals and the exploited classes. What does he think was going on throughout the twentieth century in South Africa if not expressions of popular democracy without even a hint of the institutional vote.

Some of the material and social interests of the poor majority can be partially realised through political representation. However, how can the poor majority realise (and where have they realised) a different, non-capitalist society by defining and 'ring fencing' their struggles within the institutional framework of capitalist representative (democratic) institutions?

There is no necessary or natural connection between participation in such an institutional framework (through utilising the vote, representation in state bodies etc) and the 'deepening of democracy' in ways that can make a systemic difference in the lives of the poor under capitalism. What is actually 'deepened' though, is the width and breadth of the institutional framework (ie the forms) but not the content of popular democracy itself. Fundamentally then, institutionally bound forms of 'popular democracy' can have no real long-term meaning or effect as long as capitalist social and material relations remain

politically and organisationally unchallenged.

Locating the alternatives

One of the key assumptions made by Sachs, is that the social movements (and the poor who make up those movements) that adopt the kinds of criticisms and struggle tactics he variously describes as anarchic and immature, actually desire to be part of the 'main currents of South African politics'. Indeed, he shows a complete misunderstanding (and subsequent misrepresentation) of the political and organisational character of such movements, precisely because these movements have arisen out of the very failures and betrayals of the 'main currents' and the institutional framework that gives them contemporary legitimacy.

Sachs needs to be reminded that today's (so-called) margins can quickly become tomorrow's mainstream and vice versa. The fact that the social movements are presently outside of the mainstream of South Africa's institutional politics is representative of a reality that Sachs simply does not want to face – ie, that an increasing number of poor South Africans no longer see active participation in the present institutional set-up of 'representative democracy' as being in their social and material interests.

The fact that millions of South Africans have registered to vote does not, in any way, then mean (as Sachs argues) that the present representative mechanisms of institutional democracy are the answer to the democratic aspirations of the majority. What it does mean though is that the majority continue to look, either passively or actively, to institutional representation precisely because there are, presently, few (in depth and breadth) alternative avenues for democratic expression.

The social movements are just at the beginning of struggling for, and building, such alternatives and it is to be expected that their size, appeal and actions will (for some time) continue to be up against the inherited and accumulated 'legitimacy' of bourgeois representative democracy as practiced, supported and institutionalised by the ANC.

Another line of argument adopted by Sachs - to convince us of the 'marginal' character and effect of social movement activity - is that these movements have failed to locate themselves in anti-racist struggles (in schools, labour markets etc). What does he think the Concerned Citizens Forum in Durban has been doing as part of their various struggles for non-racialised basic service rights and provision in (predominately) Indian and black communities? What does he think the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign has been doing to ensure the non-racialised application and enjoyment of education rights in (predominately) coloured and black communities?

The answer - bringing together all poor communities, regardless of race, to struggle against an ANC controlled city council/provincial administration who mostly treat poor communities (of all races) as the class enemy, while treating the predominantly white - but increasingly black - middle and upper-middle classes as their class brothers and sisters. And, all the while, claiming to be anti-racist and progressive. Indeed, to speak of anti-racist struggle in South Africa while practical actions and policies continue to discriminate against the 'historically oppressed' is to make a mockery of the entire historical basis for mass struggle in South Africa.

It is unfortunate that Sachs displays such an obvious bias and dishonesty

in trying to erect a false division between those (unnamed) social movements he claims have 'succeeded' (ie, won 'material victories for those they claim to represent') and those he claims have 'isolated themselves on the moral high ground of left-wing purity ...and abstain(ed) from meaningful interaction with the broader progressive movement'. He evidently thinks that the write-off of over R1.5-billion in electricity payment 'arrears' in the Johannesburg Metro, the direct result of the struggles waged by affiliates of the APF on the ground, does not constitute a 'material' victory.

When it comes to the character of social movements 'engagement' with the state, Sachs is clearly unaware of the varied efforts to link up and work with progressives within state structures. The reality is that these social movements have attempted to engage with state institutions, whether at the local, provincial or national level around a range of issues such as education and basic service provision.

Yet, it is the state itself that has consistently ignored such attempts at engagement, preferring to caricature and politically smear the social movements and set sections of the community against those social movements and their activists in the name of defending the 'liberation movement' and the state it controls.

Beware the real demagogues

The ANC is congratulating itself in the aftermath of its third electoral victory and have publicly argued that their victory is confirmation of the popularity of the institutions of democracy over which they preside. The ANC will no doubt, also see in this, confirmation of the marginal political and social position and effect of the 'bad' social movements and solidification of the ANC's position as

champions of the poor. However, they should be warned - do not mistake short-term appearance for sustained reality, representative institutions for lived struggle and capitalist social relations for progressive social transformation.

The very character of social movements in the 'new' South Africa is a result of hostile state action and policy (towards the poor) - not as a result of some pre-determined ideological and organisational outlook on the part of particular social movement activists hell-bent on undermining the 'liberation movement'. Social movements and those that constitute them are very 'serious about human liberation' (just ask the hundreds of social movement activists who have been jailed and beaten for exercising their democratic right to protest and public dissent) but not, as Sachs would have, in seeking such liberation wholly through institutional 'processes'. Liberation, as the majority of South Africans well know, cannot be achieved without mass, radical struggle.

In the coming years it will be a dismissive and insecure ANC and state that increasing numbers of the poor will be struggling against. An ANC and state that seem incapable of understanding or accepting that democracy is not achieved and/or measured by institutional representation, processes and proclamation but by consistent and radical popular participation and mass struggle to ensure that the fundamentals of life are the property of that mass, not of a state, not of a political party and not of a capitalist elite.

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