

For eco-socialism

Conference of the Democratic Left

This is the second *Labour Bulletin* article where **Vishwas Satgar** explains the Conference of the Democratic Left's politics and ideology. Central to its thinking is eco-socialism and he puts forward ways in which the CDL hopes to advance this alternative as part of transformative politics.

The Conference of the Democratic Left (CDL) is an exciting political and ideological journey to find a Left compass in post-apartheid South Africa. It boasts an array of Left and grassroots forces that shaped conversations at the recent Gauteng and Western Cape conferences. This conversation points to a transformative anti-capitalist politics that is not narrowly electoralist or trapped in permanent opposition.

Instead, it is about a visionary, democratic and values-based politics, drawing on anti-apartheid traditions of people's power. This stands in contrast to the mainstream national liberation Left focused on the state.

The content of democratic Left politics is being debated in earnest. What is the 'ideological pole of attraction' of the Democratic Left and what does it stand for?

CASE FOR ECO-SOCIALISM

The conversation about alternatives in the CDL is based on eco-socialism. This places the needs of human and non-human nature before profits and unlimited growth. There are four key

arguments for such an alternative.

First, global capitalism and its crisis are tied into the ecological limits it is confronting and engendering. Capitalism's unlimited accumulation is destroying the ecology that sustains life through global warming, pollution, destruction of rain forests and bio-diversity, and rapid consumption of resources. This model of production and consumption is not sustainable. The world needs three planets to reproduce the American model of capitalism.

Moreover, the externalising of ecological costs to citizens and to countries of the periphery, has reached its limits. The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has forced BP to take financial responsibility and it has also exposed similar oil spills in the Niger Delta for which capital has not taken responsibility.

Further, capitalist accumulation is incongruent with the cycles of nature. The capacity of the earth's eco-systems to absorb the ecological consequences of the capitalist system is ending as global warming shows. The capitalist crisis is not just about

financial booms and busts, it is a systemic crisis. We are living through a crisis of capitalist civilisation in its totality.

Second, 20th century 'socialist modernisation' including central planning and forced industrialisation did not address the ecological contradiction. The veneration of the 'forces of production' produced an ecological disaster in the Soviet Union as the Chernobyl nuclear tragedy showed. Hence a 21st century eco-socialism is a necessary alternative which champions social equality and environmental justice.

A third and crucial argument for an eco-socialist alternative recognises that it has been in the making for the past few decades.

Contemporary eco-socialist thinkers and movements like Via Campesina, grassroots waste recycling movements, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, struggles against water privatisation, the solidarity economy movement, the emerging environmental justice movement in South Africa and ecologically aware sections of the organised working class have a lot to teach about such an alternative.

Finally, South Africa is locked into a fossil fuel dependent development path, further accelerating global warming.

National liberation ideology, with its Soviet Marxist underpinnings, is blind to the ecological contradictions of capitalism. The policy rhetoric on the 'green economy' from the ANC state, supported by some in environmental movements, falls short in three respects.

First, it co-exists with a commitment by the South African

government to the Copenhagen process. The Copenhagen agreement affirms 'green neo-liberalism' through carbon trading and a US centred eco-imperialist approach to global warming.

Second, there is no idea of ecological restructuring within the 'green economy' framework nor a transition beyond fossil fuel structures of capitalism. The 'green economy' is added on in the context of increased expenditure on coal fired power stations by Eskom, with an economy serving the interests of capital and an Afro-neoliberal state indifferent to social justice and ecological struggles at the grassroots.

Third, the 'green economy' is part of the policy vocabulary of a ruling elite preparing to host the Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP17) in 2011. It is part of show casing South Africa and not about real transformation.

ECO-SOCIALIST PROGRAMME

The CDL's approach to developing an eco-socialist programme recognises that 'blue print' socialism is over with its authoritarian, hierarchical vanguardist party. In a world with a globalised, complex division of labour, underpinned by specialisation and information technology the only alternative for building transformative politics from below is to ensure the social character of knowledge.

Thus a transformative politics has to engage in class and popular struggles from below through a collective intellectual process. For the CDL this means advancing three grassroots organising efforts to give content to a democratic eco-socialist alternative.

Listen to the People Campaign

This is a platform to give voice to grassroots communities and social movements demanding service delivery. During the World Cup this campaign succeeded in exposing the hypocrisy of the ANC-led state amongst grassroots communities and beyond. The spending of billions on soccer stadiums and entertainment at

the expense of people's needs has been highlighted. Communities state that "stadiums can be built at record speeds but why can't our needs be met"!

This campaign foregrounded the consequences for the economy in terms of a consumption led bubble which will burst after the World Cup, macro-economic import imbalances, a fiscal crisis of the state – particularly local government, South Africa's carbon footprint and continuity with a neo-liberal model that serves the interests of capital.

This campaign has rallied forces in opposition to the ANC-government/Fifa alliance which sought to suppress democratic freedoms to struggle. Movements like the APF (Anti-Privatisation Forum) were supported in their challenge against the ANC government-Fifa clampdown on protests. This was a victory for keeping democratic space open for grassroots struggles during the Cup that will continue after it.

The 'Listen to the People Campaign' is against hosting the Olympic Games as another spectacle meant to foster a 'united nation' when in fact South Africa is polarised because of deep inequalities that such events reinforce.

People's Summit on Climate Change

The COP17 is about the battle for the future of civilisation.

Given the direction of the Copenhagen Summit and the emphasis amongst developed economies to save financial institutions rather than embark on ecological restructuring of their economies, COP17 is unlikely to bring outcomes to save planet earth. This is consistent with global reform efforts since the adoption of the Kyoto protocol. The world today has no politics at the top that can address climate change as a problem inherent to global capitalism.

The CDL is committed to keeping alive a platform to ensure people's voices are heard and global

solidarities are established to confront climate change. Our point of reference is the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in Bolivia in April 2010 and the forthcoming World Social Forum (WSF).

Post WSF the CDL will champion a Peoples Conference on Climate Change in South Africa. This conference will assess the government's approach to climate change and put forward alternatives for the ecological restructuring of our economy to drastically reduce carbon emissions while meeting people's needs.

Advancing the Solidarity Economy

The solidarity economy is an alternative to the BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) of the ANC-led alliance with regards to cooperatives and other socialised forms. It is a transformative alternative to build the capacities of the working class and the poor from below to lead structural change, grounded in values. It is about building socialised production, consumption and financial institutions which build people's power to meet human needs and ensure environmental justice.

The central campaign of the solidarity economy is to build local food economies as a response to the hunger and food stress in township communities.

CHALLENGES

The CDL is scheduled for December 2010. Its eco-socialism will develop an analysis of the global and national political economy. It must also maintain its emphasis on grassroots transformative organising and allow grassroots voices to shape the content of its eco-socialist alternative, including what shape local government will take. LB

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