

Globalisation

can unions reinvent themselves?

'The death of God left the angels in a strange position. They were overtaken suddenly by a fundamental question. The question was, 'What are angels?'
(Donald Bartheleme, 'On Angels', in *Du Gay*, 1996)

Rob Lambert has made a valuable contribution to a debate that is taking place at a critical time in the history of capitalism and the socialist movement. The 'unregulated market' experiment is in crisis all over the world. Leading capitalists, like George Soros, and a few positioned within the World Bank and IMF, are beginning to question the effectiveness of this system.

Lambert (*SA Labour Bulletin*, vol 22 no 6, December 1998) suggests that within such a context, unions should resist globalisation. But can unions resist globalisation as suggested? If so, how can this be done when labour and the left face an abundance of challenges in an increasingly globalising world? What should be the strategic objective for the unions resisting globalisation? Will the left be able to radically transform society in the interests of the working class?

The current crisis facing unregulated capital (financial) markets suggests that socialist values could be applied (as indeed they must) to the circumstances of the late 1990s and into the millennium. At the heart of all socialist values is the belief

Kuseni Dlamini responds to Rob Lambert's article on globalisation and unions.

that individuals should be given the opportunity to realise their full potential. This can only happen if the problems of unemployment, poverty, squalor, economic decline and social disintegration are addressed.

A society has to be very powerful for it to be able to successfully tackle issues of the accumulation of power while, at the same time, trying to promote the realisation of human potential. The union and left movement need to have an effective strategy to address these challenges.

Resistance to globalisation, as suggested by Rob Lambert, does not necessarily provide the right way forward for labour. Neither does embracing globalisation (as per the adapt or perish thesis).

Globalisation poses complex challenges to unions as it does to business and the state. The key to union strategy is, I would argue, amongst other things, being able to grasp the threats, opportunities and ambiguities associated with globalisation. It is a complex combination of strategies that is required from labour and the left to deal with globalisation.

The strategy should be wide and comprehensive enough to appeal to people whether they are employed or unemployed, poor or wealthy, black or white, educated or uneducated, gay or straight, female or male, well housed or badly housed.

Globalisation affects different workers in different countries and industries, at different times, differently. In the cut-throat world of global competition it sometimes happens that there is greater convergence of interests between workers and bosses in a particular company than there is between workers across an industry. For organised labour, this could mean that workers from different firms will be pitted against one another. This suggests that Lambert's argument may not hold water in some instances.

The differential impact of globalisation on workers worldwide has yet to be analysed by labour intellectuals and activists. There is a need for a brave new left agenda to engage and respond to the different challenges presented.

Facing the challenges

Globalisation is a stage in the development of the world economy in which all aspects of the economy - labour, management, raw materials, information, finance, marketing, distribution and transportation - are integrated or interdependent on a global scale.

For Castells, a global economy is one that works as a unit in real time on a planetary basis. The forces of globalisation erode the integrity and autonomy of national economies and nation-states, while at the same time promoting the global integration of the world's economies.

Globalisation threatens and challenges established ways of thinking. There are a variety of different reasons for this. Firstly,

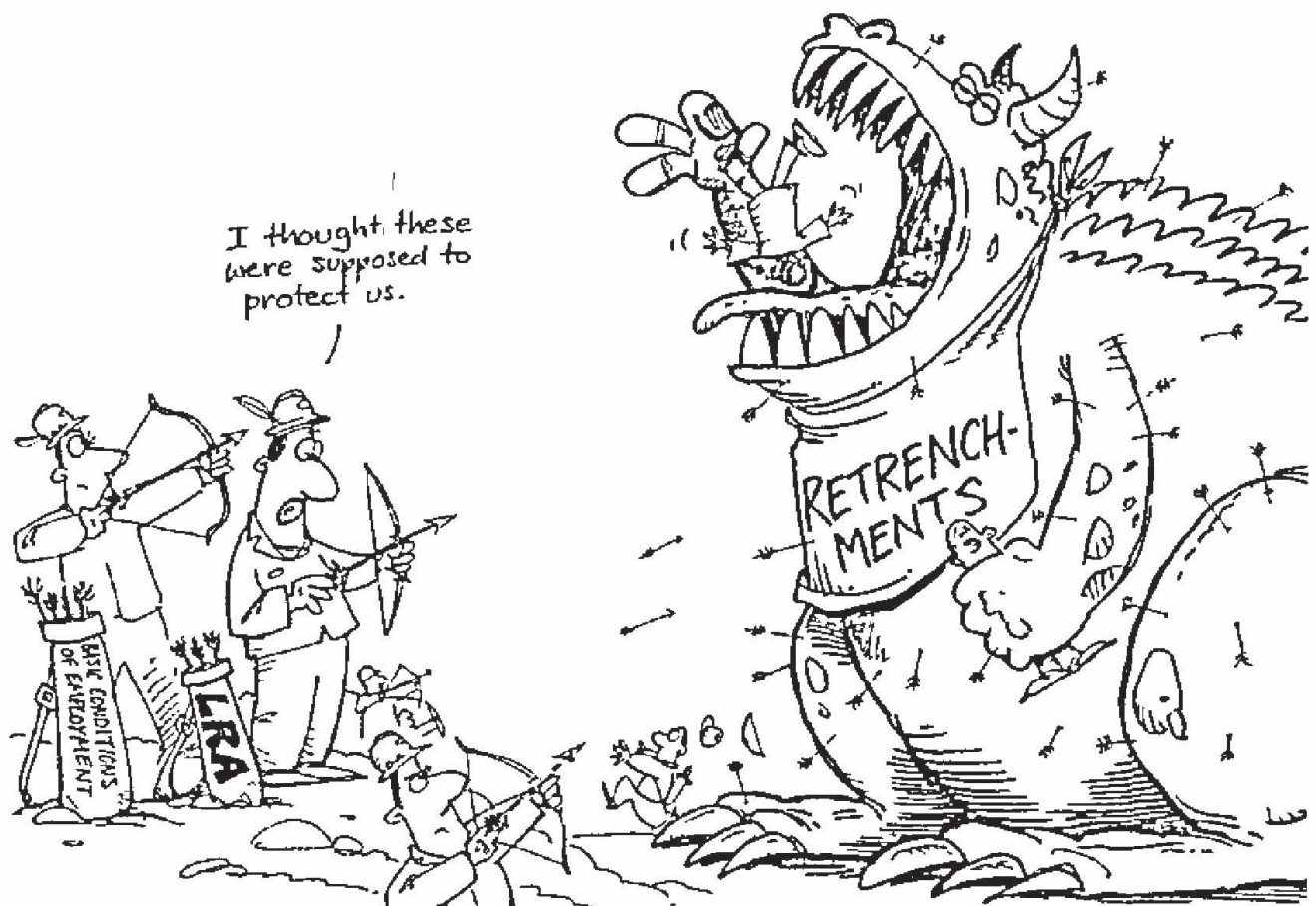
the traditional base of the trade unions, the industrial working class, is shrinking. This is partly due to increasing unemployment, (as a result of radical cuts in labour costs through downsizing, flexible production systems, re-engineering and the like), but also because of political and legislative attacks upon organised labour. What it means to be a worker today is no longer as certain as it once was.

The dominance of class as the 'master identity' of the social (that category through which all social identities are mediated) has also become problematic. This is evidenced in the growth of various new social movements, like feminism, black struggles, and the ecological movement.

Finally, the identity of the national economy has also been eroded. This gives rise to a new form of competition between trading blocks (the Pacific Rim versus the NAFTA versus the EU versus SADC versus ECOWAS). Production and exchange takes place on a global scale.

Trade unions (and the left) in most parts of the world, are currently unable to cope with the rapid social and economic change taking place. Often they lack the required ideological confidence and, by implication, the strategy and political clout to transform society. Trade unions and the left need to rethink their strategy in line with the current challenges of globalisation. Trade unions and the left need to:

- pursue not just a traditional 'class settlement', but a new relationship between men and women (the gender question). Over the past 20 years, feminism and the women's movement have challenged socialist conceptions of class, social structure and progressive political strategy. This has impacted on and resulted in a shift in gender politics;



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Unions' traditional base is shrinking due to retrenchments.

- ❑ pursue an ecological contract between generations (the environmental question) Green politics poses a central challenge to the mainstream ideologies of the century,
- ❑ creatively respond to the challenges posed by the other forces of social fragmentation, such as, ethnicity, religion and sexuality. These forces impact on class solidarity and identity. For example, before the First World War many Marxists believed that a war between countries would not take place because soldiers across nations had more in common with each other than they did with the ruling classes

Rethinking social reality

The impact of globalisation on society has required that trade unions and the left seriously rethink their historic

assumptions about social reality. These movements need to address ways in which they extend social control of the economy - They should look beyond the productive economy to free individual potential. Their emphasis should not only be on the redistribution of wealth, but they should take the lead in determining and indeed shaping the processes of wealth creation.

Trade unions and the left should also accept that public ownership is not necessarily the only way to achieve socialism. The existence of markets is not necessarily antithetical to the public interest. Instead, the challenge is to ensure that markets work in the public interest. Markets are, after all, socially constructed and extraordinarily fragile. Their operations reflect the prevailing balance of power between the major classes at any given time.

Trade unions and the left can engage the markets by establishing an egalitarian economic contract to ensure that the economy also serves their social interests.

The development of such a vision, strategy or direction requires that the trade unions and the left demonstrate a willingness and capacity to come to terms* with the realities (threats, opportunities and ambiguities) of a globalising and liberalising world. In a nutshell, they should actively and creatively engage with the forces of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

The Natal University academic, Ari Sitas (1995), has suggested that Gramsci's argument for a 'hegemonic movement', a movement organised through a party of organic thinkers which provide society with intellectual and moral leadership is attractive for the challenges of our time. Such a movement needs a voice and praxis that is informed by a sound analysis of the uneven and contradictory tendencies of globalisation and the impact on trade unions and the left.

Resisting globalisation?

Before suggesting that unions resist globalisation, Rob Lambert must tell us how they should do this. Successful union resistance hinges on, inter alia, the state of organisation (size and strength of membership) and the ability to campaign and win demands.

In addition, the labour movement should be able to define a coherent strategy under the ever-changing circumstances it finds itself in. In the current conjuncture, it is not clear that the union movement can do this. Rob Lambert ignores this fact.

In addition, Rob Lambert fails to comment on the fact that different trade unions and sections of the left hold

fundamentally different views on the current global state of affairs.

These differences are rooted in theory and there are many opposing strategies on how trade unions should operate in the current situation.

The very notion of union resistance to globalisation therefore needs to be problematised. Where does it begin? What should be its substance, agent and scope? Is it given that it will yield the best possible outcome for trade unions and their members?

Conclusion

The impact that trade unions and the left will have depends not on utopian vision, but on their being able to provide a qualitative critique of the present, and developing a strategy of how they will achieve progressive change. The left in South Africa and the world needs to reinvent itself simply because its project (an emancipating, egalitarian and universalist project) was born out of a particular historic moment that has since passed by. ★

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