

In defence of social movements

Reply to Luke Sinwell

In the previous *Labour Bulletin* Luke Sinwell argued that the new social movements in South Africa need to develop political and strategic direction in order to bring fundamental change. **Mzi Mngeni** argues that these movements play an important role in the continuous building of vibrant working-class organisation and so should not be viewed as not opposing neo-liberalism.

I want to respond to the article by Luke Sinwell 'Defensive social movement battles' need to engage with politics' in *SALB 34.1*. It is challenging and raises many dangers in our analysis of social movements.

I believe Luke is misreading the nature of the struggles that are being waged by social movements and he downplays their militant role.

Whilst I agree with Luke that we should not romanticise these movements, I disagree that the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) or other social movements do not challenge neo-liberalism in their struggles. He argues that these movements do not challenge neo-liberalism because they are not themselves anti neo-liberal. I believe however that it is only their leadership that is not anti neo-liberal.

The APF has embarked on a number of initiatives and activities like Operation Khanyisa (reconnection of electricity), Operation Vula Manzi (bridging water pipes and by-passing pre-paid water meters) and land invasions to erect housing. These are direct challenges to neo-liberalism from the grassroots and were not the decisions of the

leadership but of the communities.

In many protests by social movements slogans point to ANC policies as the source of poverty. These include slogans such as 'Down with Gear', 'Phantsi ne Privatisation', 'Down with water and electricity cut-offs' and 'Houses for all'. These reflect the impact of ANC neo-liberal policies on communities. Such slogans are not formulated by leadership, but by community militants in struggle.

It is clear that Luke doesn't understand the nature of the issues raised by these movements when people in the APF, Social Movements Indaba, Abahlali baseMjondolo and Landless People's Movement took up struggles against water privatisation and water and electricity cut-offs.

MOVEMENTS AND ANC CONCESSIONS

Luke states that some communities and movements are buying into ANC policies, but he doesn't specify which areas he is referring to. It is also not true that movements support ANC policies, even if they still vote for it. Many social movements have identified the ANC as the main source of the problem.

Investigations in communities where movements operate have found that it is mainly ANC councillors who are caught up in mismanagement of funds for delivering services. In many service delivery revolts, movements are raising demands against nepotism in tenders and jobs which points directly to ANC councillors, ward committees and mainly ANC municipalities. When movements engage municipalities on these issues they are referred to provincial government, which in turn points to national government.

This means the ANC government on all levels is shifting the blame for not delivering basic services. It is from this experience that movements have decided to embark on new methods of struggle. Movements have succeeded in exposing the emptiness of the promises made by the ANC in its election manifestos. Many communities and movements have realised the need to rely on their own strength, rather than relying on the ANC government. It is from this understanding that I believe movements are not buying into ANC policies.

Luke points out that many movements die after they are given state concessions. That for Luke is a sign of the power of the ANC and its neo-liberal agenda. While I agree with Luke on the case of Khutsong and other townships he mentions, it is politically and analytically incorrect to treat these cases as a general phenomenon.

Winning concessions in the political landscape is vital for intensifying our struggles and strengthening our organisations. In Khutsong people have won the demand for re-incorporation into Gauteng. Whether the Khutsong movement died due to the top-down implementation of its re-incorporation is another issue. Many militants in Khutsong are aware that some of their demands were not met and cannot be met without waging another battle. What is clear is that the ANC regime was forced to respond to Khutsong due to their militancy.

In the present context we will continue to experience the dying out of movements while new ones emerge. Continuing attacks on the living standards of the poor; lack of mobilisation by the masses and the weak state of organisations of the working class is testimony to this.

In this period movements are experimenting with methods of organising and struggle and new strategies and tactics. These schools of working-class struggle cannot happen overnight. This means, social movements, while fighting government policies, are learning to apply new fighting methods. In this process movements are strengthening organisational capacity and producing new leaders.

I agree with Luke that concessions do not pose any threat to neo-liberalism, yet the Zuma neo-liberal regime has been forced to re-incorporate Khutsong into Gauteng. This is a sign that resistance against neo-liberalism is mounting.

Service delivery revolts are not just spontaneous actions, they are a reflection of a general discomfort

among many sections of the working class. These revolts are not planned in boardrooms by leaders opposed to neo-liberalism, but reflect genuine working-class demands.

In many instances movements' leadership do not change for some time but is able to sustain organisation by practising democracy. It is important to emphasise that within movements there are contradictions and weaknesses combined with achievements. It would be counter productive to say they are not revolutionary because they are not against neo-liberalism. The new social movements carry a big political weight in post-apartheid South Africa.

Furthermore, social movements represent a breakthrough and re-grouping of working-class movements outside of the old liberation movements. It is from this understanding that one cannot remove the name 'revolutionary' from movements because they carry the weight of an historical mission.

CHALLENGES FACING MOVEMENTS

One of the major challenges for movements is to link up and give solidarity to each other's struggles. Attempts to build links between communities and movements should be a daily practice. This is not an easy task when there is a lull and organisations of the poor are fighting defensive struggles whilst the ruling class has the upper hand.

New social movements represent a political regrouping of the working class. These movements are at an embryonic stage but many lessons are drawn in struggle.

One of the successes of social movements is the ability to preserve a group of activists who want to take the struggle forward with an eagerness to continue fighting.

These militants are organic intellectuals produced by their communities in struggle. They are not different from progressive academic activists and intellectuals, and both should learn from each other.

Intellectuals who work with militants in communities should be treated as activists, irrespective of their political persuasion.

The relationship between intellectuals with their knowledge and community activists should be two-way. It should be built on creating an alternative mass movement.

It is incorrect for academics to think that communities don't know what they want or how to wage battles. Many intellectuals go to communities with the intention of giving political direction. It is incorrect for intellectuals to think that the masses are not politically aware when they are the ones taking up issues.

We must be careful not to substitute social movement organisation with artificial structures. The best way to learn about community struggles is for intellectuals to participate as learners not teachers.

Luke suggests that owning a particular ideology is the way for movements to chart a better way forward - a political ideology is the solution because it is the truth. The working class and its fighting forces may not know about ideologies and revolutionary theories, but they know that to realise their demands they have to struggle. In the course of struggle they learn new ways of fighting.

The new social movements haven't engaged in discussion about their ideological orientation. They are at an embryonic stage of development. Ideology will emerge in struggle. An academic's ideological orientation could stifle an intellectual relationship with militants. It is also important to look at the present context in which these issues are being raised. LB

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