

In search of democratic compass

Conference of the Democratic Left

Participants in the Conference of the Democratic Left process are seeking fresh anti-capitalist alternatives. Believing that South Africa's national liberation project has veered to the right and embraced neo-liberalism, it hopes to provide a platform where a participatory politics from below can emerge. **Vishwas Satgar** reports.

In October 2008, a group of 60 activists from different movements (within and outside the ANC-led alliance), across the country, engaged in grassroots activism attended a workshop in Johannesburg to discuss the crisis of the national liberation project.

At this meeting several important observations were made.

First, the economic policy choices made by the ANC-government have not addressed the aspirations and needs of the people.

Second, the left has made many compromises and has lost ground in the transition to democracy. South Africa's so-called 'National Democratic Revolution' is not led by the working class.

Third, the national liberation left is politically degenerating with authoritarian populism substituting for visionary, strategic and principled politics.

In this meeting a commitment was made to deepening political dialogue in a bottom up way, to host a national Conference of the Democratic Left (CDL) and to make a public call to invite endorsements for the CDL process. In January 2010 such a call was issued by the national convening committee and

in March its website (www.democraticleft.org.za) was launched.

IMAGINING DEMOCRATIC LEFT POLITICS

Since the French Revolution in 1789 with its emphasis on equality, liberty and fraternity, the modern left has constantly evolved. By 1848 with the *Communist Manifesto* affirming the existence of communism and Marxism, the mainstream left imagination was redefined.

In the 20th century the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was the midwife of the first workers' state and this event and its ideas, as expressed through Soviet Marxism, again provided a new reference point for left politics. Inspired by this, many Third World revolutions from China to Nicaragua followed, with seismic historical effects.

In 1955 the Bandung Conference announced the emergence of revolutionary nationalism as the platform for anti-colonial struggles. Carrying this banner national liberation movements fought epic struggles against colonialism and imperialism. Many of these struggles from Vietnam to South Africa

achieved an iconic place within the global left imagination.

The year 1968 also marked an important development in global left politics when worker and student protests in the heartlands of capitalism, challenged the alienation of Keynesian welfare capitalism and with new left voices defied the dominant Soviet alternative. In the wake of 1968 various participatory democracy, peace, feminist and ecology movements emerged that have also contributed to redefining left politics and identities.

In 1999 a confrontation in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation and a neo-liberal world order ushered in the emergence of a post-Soviet, post-national liberation and post-social democratic left. The new global left highlighted the failures of past historical political projects and most importantly how these projects had capitulated to neo-liberalism.

Within the process of the CDL we are wrestling with this left inheritance, its problems, mistakes and solutions. We are attempting a critical and self aware conversation as a plural and diverse left to find a new identity.

The other important premise informing the conversation inside the CDL, relates to our appreciation of the contradictions of contemporary global capitalism.

While the wage-labour contradiction is central for class politics, there are at the same time other salient contradictions within capitalism that have to be struggled against. These include the contradiction between the forces of production and the ecological conditions of production (climate change, pollution, limited resources); the crisis of social reproduction expressed through inequality, hunger, unemployment and poverty (permanently unemployed who do not have basic needs met); and the weakening of democracy and a new 'super-power imperialism'.

Central to the resolution of these contradictions is the search for a new democratic left politics that can serve as the basis to claim the future in the present. Such claims to the future need to encourage political action against depoliticisation, careerism, embourgeoisement and fatalism.

In practice a democratic left politics has to be grounded in shared ethical values and a new understanding of building transformative power and creative alternatives that build the capacities of the working class, the poor and citizenry to lead society. Many of the conversations in the CDL are about framing such a new anti-capitalist politics.

Finally, we all share a critique of the global crisis of neo-liberal capitalism and the national liberation project in South Africa. As the national liberation project veered to the right and embraced neo-liberalism, it tied itself to a crisis-ridden model of accumulation of transnational capital. Hence the crisis of global capitalism is also

reflected in the crisis of the national liberation project.

For many in the CDL the national liberation tradition has lost its way and has become indefensible. For those who have been involved in the national liberation struggle it is difficult to accept the corruption, the failure to deliver on promises, the arrogance of those who lead and the class formation and deradicalisation of the mainstream national liberation project.

Authoritarian populist practices threaten all the democratic gains of the struggle that we fought for.

We need to prevent the costs of capitalism's crisis being passed on to workers and the poor. The loss of nearly a million jobs over the past year, exposes the limits of the national liberation left. In this context the CDL is attempting to define an alternative politics and new left imagination.

ENDORSEMENT FROM BELOW

The CDL is more than individuals. At its Gauteng consultative conference held on 20 March this year, 160 people attended representing 35 organisations. Representatives came from grassroots communities engaged in service delivery protests, leading issue-based social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and the Unemployed Peoples Movement, independent trade unions and various left groups.

A similar gathering was held in the Western Cape. Both provincial conferences are part of a process, which includes efforts to hold similar conferences in other provinces, before the hosting of a series of national conferences to further develop the content of democratic left politics.

At both the Gauteng and Western Cape conferences all participants endorsed the Call for the

Conference of the Democratic Left and firmly committed to support the process.

EMERGING VIEWS ON DEMOCRATIC LEFT POLITICS

Real utopian vision

We are living through a time of the global tyranny of capital. The confusions and dogmas of the 20th century national liberation left do not assist in confronting this reality.

First, we are told 'class compromise' is the only way forward. Thus, the left has to ensure conditions for ongoing accumulation while negotiating concessions like the Millennium Development Goals, poverty reduction, and other mild redistributive measures. The working class and poor must only accept what is conceded by capital.

Second, 'pragmatism' is another current approach. This means 'what works' or rather what fits into the capitalist framework is what we must pursue.

Third, we are told that former revolutionary texts have all the answers. Some of the guardians of these texts tell us if we implement these revolutionary formulas it will be different. All of this shrinks and limits the scope for a genuine left politics.

A democratic left has to keep alive and inspire a capacity to dream in a globalised world, while having its feet firmly rooted in popular and class struggles. We should not surrender our utopian vision for a democratic eco-socialist society as we struggle.

Values-based politics

Neo-liberalism has adopted inequality, exploitation, competitiveness, greed, ecological destruction and possessive individualism as its values. This is visible in South Africa on a daily basis. A democratic left has to have



A delegate addresses the Conference of the Democratic Left in Gauteng.

alternative values to provide a basis for political practice, institution building and policy. These values must express themselves in everyday living and struggle.

In this sense the democratic left is different from the 20th century left for which means justified political ends. Instead values humanise and qualify how we struggle. Values define our political identity and positions. These values need to be about people's power, social justice, ecological sustainability, solidarity, liberty, non-racialism, integrity and public service. We are debating this vision which has to be answered in the CDL process.

Centrality of participatory democracy

The 20th century left was sharply polarised over the question of reform versus revolution or parliamentary versus extra-parliamentary struggle. The South African left is also marked by this. In the CDL we are moving beyond this in trying to develop anti-capitalist politics.

Such a politics recognises that power exists in the state, the market, civil society, the means of production and the global imperialist structure. Hence anti-capitalist struggles for reclaiming

the 'globalised state' against marketisation, against exploitation and for an anti-capitalist civil society, anti-imperialist civil society requires a new participatory democratic politics that builds popular and working-class power from below. This is a necessary precondition for a left shift in South African politics.

Hence the importance of alternative strategies to extend participatory democracy through participatory development planning (we call for Community Transformation Councils as an alternative to the ward committee system), a solidarity economy and worker control. Taken together these strategies from below reject a vanguardist approach to knowledge. Instead popular experience from practice and the social character of knowledge will inform our participatory democracy.

Renewing working-class solidarity

Neo-liberal competitive restructuring has also meant the restructuring of the working class. Great fragmentation exists between wage earners, the self employed, the underemployed and the permanently unemployed which

polarises the working class. National liberation politics does not address this reality and working-class solidarity is in crisis.

A democratic left politics has to go beyond the traditional working class located in trade unions. The over four million unemployed in South Africa together with the unionised working class needs to rebuild solidarities and a common working-class identity. This requires in the short to medium term a new political form, an anti-capitalist united front.

CONCLUSION

The CDL is a process, not an event. As a conscious political initiative it is in a stage of creative definition with various debates, ideological themes and grassroots struggles shaping what it is. At this stage if it succeeds in provoking new grassroots struggles, transformative practices and new thinking about post-apartheid left politics, then it is succeeding as anti-capitalist politics. LB

Vishwas Satgar is a member of the national convening committee of the Conference of the Democratic Left. This is the first of a two-part contribution to the SALB on the politics and ideology of the CDL.