

a discussion of the SACP programme

Insurrection, negotiations & 'war of position'

by KARL VON HOLDT

The *Path to Power* was adopted by the SACP last year. The programme was strongly influenced by the experience of mass struggles and uprisings during the period of people's power (1984 - 6). It puts forward the perspective of a revolutionary movement seizing power through an insurrection. We are, however, seeing a transition towards a negotiated settlement in South Africa. The ANC has already suspended its armed struggle. Does this mean that the party programme is out of date?

The Path to Power does emphasise that "armed struggle cannot be counterposed with dialogue, negotiation and justifiable compromise, as if they were mutually exclusive." It notes that every liberation struggle "has had its climax at the negotiating table, occasion-

ally involving compromises judged to be in the interests of revolutionary advance." But, *The Path to Power* warns, the ruling class and its allies "see negotiation as a way of pre-empting revolutionary transformation... by pushing the liberation movement into negotiation before it is strong enough to back its demands with sufficient power on the ground."

The programme goes on to state that prospects of a negotiated settlement should not be allowed to "infect the purpose and content of our present strategic approaches. *We are not engaged in a struggle whose objective is merely to generate sufficient pressure to bring the other side to the negotiating table.*"

The government has clearly moved much faster towards negotiations than the party expected. The unban-

ning of the ANC, the SACP and other organisations, and the government's acceptance of the need to negotiate with representatives of the people, are tremendous victories for the democratic movement. But at the same time, De Klerk is taking these steps with a great deal of confidence, and from what seems to be a strong position. He *appears* to be doing exactly what the programme warns about - that is, pushing the liberation movement into negotiations while it is still fairly weak (although, as I shall show later, the state has grave weaknesses, while the liberation movement has great strengths).

This gap between the programme of seizure of power through insurrection, and the reality of negotiation with an enemy which is still very powerful, has contributed to

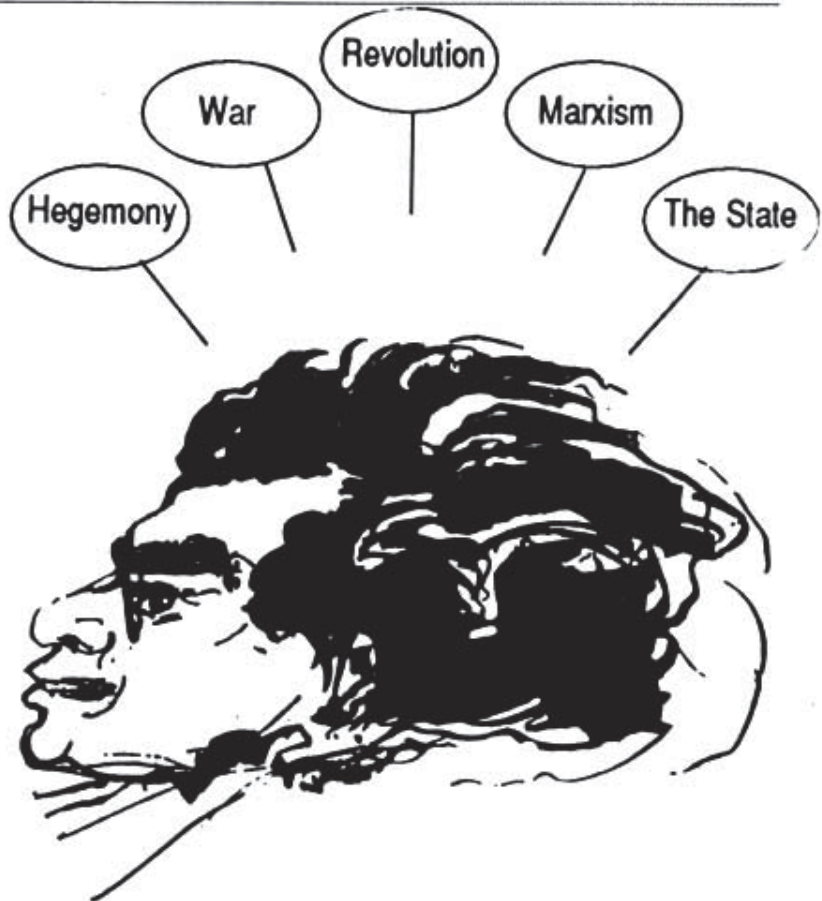
some confusion and demobilisation among activists. This is not helped by the rhetorical statements of some activists that 'we shall seize power' if negotiations fail.

What kind of state?

The situation is made more confusing by comparisons with other countries. In recent discussions of armed struggle and insurrection, SACP activists refer to the examples of Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mozambique and of course the Soviet Union. But the South African state is very different from the state in any of these countries prior to revolution. All of these states were extremely weak, both organisationally and militarily. Their economies were poor and undeveloped, and the majority of the people lived in the countryside. These conditions favoured in some cases protracted guerrilla warfare in the countryside, in others a relatively quick urban insurrection.

In contrast to these, the South African state is powerful, large, wealthy and complex. This points to the special aspect of South Africa's colonialism of a special type (CST).

On the one hand CST points to the *colonial* nature of oppression in South Africa. But on the other hand, CST points to the fact that South Africa is like no other colony. The state finds its base in a large settled white population, which gives it a greater strength and cohesion



than any other colonial state. South Africa's economy, based in the first place on an abundance of gold and other minerals, is far more highly industrialised and developed than in any other colony, *or any other country that has experienced a socialist revolution*. This makes our economy and society more complex and advanced, and has also produced a large, highly developed state with great financial, technical and military resources. As *The Path to Power* puts it, "South Africa is now a relatively advanced capitalist society with the most developed infrastructure on the African continent." (p 22)

This analysis of the state suggests that power in South Africa cannot be 'seized' as it was in Russia, Cuba or Nicaragua through armed

struggle and insurrection. Certainly no relatively advanced capitalist state has ever been forcefully overthrown before. It suggests, rather, that the struggle in South Africa can better be characterised as a 'war of position'. This concept was developed by the Italian communist, Antonio Gramsci, in the 1920s as he attempted to develop an analysis of struggle in the advanced industrial societies of Western Europe.

Hegemony and war of position

Gramsci was concerned with two features of these societies that distinguished them from backward societies such as Russia. Firstly, their states were large and powerful. Secondly, their ruling classes gained the *consent* of their citizens - that is, the state had *legitimacy*.

Gramsci argued that the modern capitalist state is immensely powerful, and reaches deep into civil society. He also argued that, in the modern capitalist society civil society became powerful and complex. It is characterised by a range of institutions - churches, schools, trade unions, political parties, newspapers, etc, which are outside the state and independent of it. He argued that the capitalist class does not simply rule through the state. It establishes its hegemony* in civil society, through its ideological and organisational leadership of the institutions of civil society - through the media, culture, sport, political parties and even the reformist trade unions.

He argued that civil society was like a system of trenches and forts that protected the state from onslaught. Under these conditions a strategy of war of movement, ie insurrection, such as that used by the Bolsheviks, could not succeed. What was needed, instead, was a protracted 'war of position', through which the Communist Party could establish its hegemony in civil society.

The 'war of position' was not a war with physical weapons. It was a strategy for struggling to establish ideological and organisational leadership in institutions of civil society - the trade unions, the media, the co-ops, the schools, cultural and

sports clubs, etc. It meant building a broader and broader alliance in opposition to the ruling class, and seeking to establish the leadership of the working class party over this alliance.

The aim was to undermine the legitimacy of the ruling class by building the hegemony of the working class. The working class party had to establish its leadership over the nation, in opposition to the ruling class. Such a strategy could also imply attempting to capture certain state institutions, such as local authorities, and participating in parliamentary politics.

War of position and insurrection

Gramsci never fully developed his theory of 'war of position', partly because he was in jail, cut off from practical revolutionary activity. He was also writing under the eye of the prison censor, and so had to use difficult language. Nonetheless, his ideas could be useful in illuminating our struggle.

At the outset it must be stressed that Gramsci never saw the 'war of position' as excluding 'war of movement' (ie armed struggle and insurrection). Rather, he regarded insurrection or force as a moment, or a tactical option, within the scope of a broad 'war of position'. In any particular struggle the relation of insurrection to 'war of position' would be determined by the political and social condi-

tions in that society.

South African society is of course very different from the capitalist democracies of Europe (although we must not forget that Gramsci developed this theory while languishing in the jails of fascist Italy!). The South African state is characterised by violence and lack of democratic rights for the majority and therefore lacks hegemony. CST points to the centrality of national oppression. These factors suggest that insurrection and armed struggle would play a more important role in the South African 'war of position'

In order to understand the role of insurrectionary activity in the SA struggle, let us turn to the period of mass uprising in 1984-6. It was precisely this period that inspired the party to adopt an insurrectionary perspective in *The Path to Power*.

The uprisings of 1984-6

Two conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of that period. Firstly, the uprisings and semi-insurrectionary actions did not come close to a seizure of state power. In the end, the sustained and vicious repression of the state of emergency managed to break organisation in the community and bring the revolt to a standstill. The democratic forces were very weak militarily.

On the other hand, however, these struggles had an enormous political impact on

* By 'hegemony' I mean 'organisational and ideological leadership'.

South Africa:

- They entrenched the hegemony of the ANC/UDF alliance in the townships. The launch of COSATU in 1985 brought a fundamental realignment of the trade union movement towards an alliance with UDF and the ANC. It is this alliance that has given the democratic movement such a powerful organised base today.
- The masses developed a rich organisational experience. Although most organisations were immobilised by repression, this experience meant that as soon as conditions allowed they would be rebuilt.
- The period gave great momentum to the international anti-apartheid struggle. South Africa became more isolated than ever.
- The uprisings provoked divisions and ideological crisis in the ruling bloc. Businessmen, church leaders, students and academics went to visit the ANC in Lusaka. Both the PFP and the NP suffered splits. The NP lost many of its most impressive intellectuals and ideologues. Among sports, cultural, teachers and church organisations there was a growing sympathy and respect for the democratic movement.
- Sanctions and the debt crisis deepened the economic crisis. Investment declined as businessmen lost confidence.



Militant youth with home-made gun - but armed insurrection is an unlikely prospect under present conditions

Photo: Anna Zieminski/Afrapix

Thus the uprisings of 1984-6 show us two things: firstly, the difficulty and perhaps impossibility of seizing power directly. The state remained strong, while the military forces of MK are weak. Conditions do not favour a protracted war in the countryside. Urban guerrilla warfare is by definition very difficult to establish. In other words, seizure of power is a very remote possibility.

Ungovernability: the crisis of apartheid

The second point about the struggles of 1984-6, however, is that they show the state is weak in other ways. This period fundamentally altered the terrain of political struggle. The state lost all political direction because it could no longer govern the people. In fact, the slogan of ungovernability may be one of the most profound slogans of the decade. The education system has proven to be ungovernable and has virtually collapsed. The rent boycott and the municipal election boycott of 1988 show the townships to be ungovernable. And chronic industrial unrest and resistance by black workers to the 1988 LRA show that the shopfloor is also ungovernable.

Modern industrial society cannot function when so many arenas are ungovernable. In the words of The Path to Power, "Monopoly capital now tends to secure its labour from a more stable, better qualified and higher consuming workforce" (p 22). But when the school system is in collapse people cannot be better qualified. When townships are ungovernable there can be no stability.

A highly industrialised economy requires some kind of co-operation from its workforce. But when militant trade unions are vehicles for workers to continually challenge management authority, when shopfloor struggles are continually linked to struggles against apartheid,

then modern production becomes unmanageable.

CST: an explosive contradiction

It is this ungovernability, and the prospect of ongoing resistance and township uprisings, that has provoked crisis for business and the state. It is clear that the *special colonial* nature of South African society has created an unstable and at times explosive contradiction. As a modern industrial society it has given birth to a state which is too strong to overthrow by force. But as a state founded on national oppression and deprivation, it provokes resistance, revolt and ungovernability.

The relatively advanced nature of SA society had other spin-offs too. For example, SA has a fairly highly-developed media and communications system. It has a large white intelligentsia and middle class, with a vociferous liberal wing. It also has many institutions of bourgeois democracy (parliament, and independent judiciary, etc), although they are racially defined. These features distinguish South Africa from backward societies and colonies such as Mozambique and Rhodesia before their liberation. They have made it more difficult for the government to conceal popular resistance and state repression. This has contributed to the divisions and moral and ideological confusion in the ruling bloc.

In the gloomy days of

1987-8 it seemed that repression had brought the struggle to a standstill. However the struggles of 1984-6 had contributed to a fundamental shift in the balance of forces. Things continued to change beneath the surface. It became clear to reformists in the government that apartheid was ungovernable. Once PW Botha had been ousted, the way was clear to attempt a controlled move to accommodating the oppressed. The uprisings and the 'war of position' strategy (see below p. 16) had reinforced each other, producing a situation of ungovernability, of the erosion of state power, of division in the ruling bloc, and of the increasing legitimacy of the ANC. This forced the government to move towards negotiations.

The current situation and war of position

In terms of the perspective outlined in *The Path to Power*, the current situation looks very bleak and unpromising. The government still controls a large, smoothly functioning and extremely powerful state apparatus. And, rhetoric aside, it is clear that the ANC does not have the organisational or military capacity to seize power through an insurrection. Doubtless this situation is contributing to demobilisation and confusion among activists.

If, however, we view our struggle as a protracted 'war of position' the situation appears more positive. Firstly, it

becomes clear that the government is in many ways extremely weak: it is in desperate need of a political settlement, it has a narrowing social base, the white sector is in disarray, and the bantustans and other collaborationist structures are collapsing or moving towards the ANC.

In the second place, the government's move to initiate negotiations was to be expected. The chronic ungovernability and resistance could not be accommodated in an advanced capitalist society - this would force the regime to try and reach some kind of accommodation with the oppressed.

In the third place, negotiations are not the end of the road, they are simply one more step in a protracted war of position. While the strategy of the regime is to retreat from apartheid in such a way as to preserve as much of white privilege and capitalist power as possible, the task facing the democratic forces is to use that retreat in order to establish more power for the masses. In other words, the task is to use negotiations to open the way for consolidating people's power and making further advances.

MDM strategy: war of position in practice

In fact, the MDM has already established a rich practice and tradition of 'war of position', even if this has not been fully theorised in relation to the question of political power. We have here a concrete elaboration,



The ANC does not have the capacity to seize power militarily

Photo: Julian Cobbing/Afrapix

in practice, of Gramsci's schematic concept of war of position. Over the last decade or more the strategy of the MDM has consisted of:

- Building powerful, militant mass organisations at the workplace and in the communities and schools, with the aim of constantly challenging oppression and exploitation, and building people's power.
- Establishing a broad multi-class liberation alliance under the hegemony of the ANC.
- Extending the influence of this movement into many spheres, such as sport, culture, education, etc
- Building an even broader anti-apartheid alliance in order to isolate and weaken the regime.
- Encouraging division in the ruling bloc.

These strategies, taken together, have entrenched the MDM within South Africa's relatively advanced society, and made it impossible to dislodge. Apartheid South

Africa has become chronically 'ungovernable'. From these bases the MDM has been able to launch a rich range of campaigns and struggles - strikes, stayaways, rent boycotts, election boycotts, school boycotts, consumer boycotts, demonstrations and marches.

Mass struggle has been complemented by successful international diplomacy, which culminated in the Harare Declaration. The publication by the ANC of its constitutional guidelines was also a masterly blow in the 'war of position'.

This strategy of war of position has been complemented by 'war of movement' tactics - armed struggle, underground propaganda, and - in 1976-7, 80-1 and 84-6 - mass insurrectionary activity. Each round of the latter has confirmed the 'ungovernability' of apartheid South Africa, boosted mass consciousness and organisation, increased the hegemonic authority of the ANC alliance, broadened the range of forces

opposed to apartheid, increased the isolation of the regime and deepened the division of the ruling bloc.

Although some left critics have dismissed the armed and insurrectionary tactics of the liberation movement as misguided, the above analysis shows that they have been important elements of the 'war of position'.

Negotiations and the war of position

But how, then, do we understand the current phase of transition to negotiation in terms of war of position? Much theoretical and analytical work needs to be done on this issue, but some points can be made.

In the first place, we can look at concrete struggles in various sectors. The programme of land occupations organised by civics in the Transvaal and OFS shows a dynamic relationship between mass action and negotiations. Firstly, shackdwellers and overcrowded people occupy a piece of land and demand to negotiate with the local city council.

Prior to this the leadership will have spent hours together with progressive planners, engineers and other experts, drawing up a proposal for how the land should be developed, infrastructure laid, and houses built. Then they go into negotiations with their proposals. In some cases the council has been so pressurised and impressed that it has offered finance and assistance in putting the proposed develop-

BUILDING THE PARTY

ment into practice. At all stages the implementation is kept under democratic control.

Here we see a dynamic combination of mass action, negotiations and democratic planning for a new South Africa. The space for this advance has been created by the movement towards negotiation at a national level.

A similar process is evident in the COSATU/ NACTU/SACCOLA negotiations over the LRA. Here the programme of stayaways, militant strikes and demonstrations, taken together with the prospect of a democratic government, forced leading employers to accept that the workplace will continue to be 'ungovernable' until a labour law is passed that is acceptable to the union movement. This gives the unions the opportunity to strengthen their base in the economy so that workers will be a powerful - and advancing - force in a democratic South Africa. NUMSA's negotiation over industrial training, and COSATU's workers charter campaign, have a similar significance.

One could add examples from the education arena, from the struggle against group areas, and others, but the point is clear - through a combination of mass action, expert planning and negotiation, organisations are using the space afforded by the current situation to begin the transformation of South Africa.

A similar approach will have to be taken to central pol-



Strikes - pushing back the frontiers of management control

Photo: Afrapix

itical negotiations. For example, a key demand of the ANC is for a constituent assembly. Undoubtedly the government will reject this demand. A programme of mass pressure in support of this demand (national demonstrations, marches, strikes, etc) may well be the only way to resolve this issue. This however will only happen if the ANC is well organised on a national scale and if it succeeds in clarifying the need for a constituent assembly at a mass level.

Mass action rather than armed struggle

As far as the democratic movement is concerned, one of the urgent needs in the current situation is to neutralise the repressive forces of the state, rather than to provoke them. This has a bearing on the question of insurrection and armed struggle. The tactic of the democratic forces in negotiations should be to

neutralise the arena of military conflict, where the ANC is relatively weak, and develop the arena of disciplined mass organisation and action, where the democratic movement has greatest strength. The Pretoria Minute pointed in this direction. While the ANC agreed to suspend armed struggle, it resisted the government's demand for an end mass action.

In conclusion, *The Path to Power* will have to be revised in the light of the current situation. The insurrectionary perspective of *The Path to Power* was a significant advance over the 1962 programme, in that it pointed to the importance of mass activity and organisation in the urban centres. However, its treatment of the issue of negotiations is inadequate. Given the nature of South African society, negotiations will be a central element in any transfer of power. This needs to be reflected in the programme. ☆