

# Where is the South African Left and where should it go?

There has been much criticism from the Left around the waste of resources on the Fifa World Cup which could be allocated to pro-poor projects. **Luke Sinwell** however argues that the Left is mainly stuck in a mode of critiquing which does little to challenge the supremacy of neo-liberalism.

Many criticisms have emerged over the past weeks in the form of pamphlets, documentaries and lectures that were intended to assist people in understanding the socio-political and ecological costs of the 2010 World Cup from Left-wing and anti neo-liberal perspectives.

The Amandla Forum and the Conference of the Democratic Left (CDL) organised a number of events around this theme. They posed key questions such as whether or not 'first world' events, like the World Cup or Miss World beauty pageants are really what South Africa should be focusing on. They questioned whether or not pressing developmental needs like health care and the right to decent education should instead be the priority.

The Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) also distributed pamphlets and organised a march on the opening day of the World Cup which declared that 'Only the Rich will Score in 2010'. The APF

correctly pointed out that the staggering R17.4-billion spent on World Cup stadiums, which are likely to become useless white elephants after the celebrations, could have been used to build 350 000 RDP houses, or to provide employment benefits for 750 000 people.

While these criticisms are important, the danger is that they can hide fundamental weaknesses of the Left in post-apartheid South Africa. While the Left lays sharp critiques against neo-liberalism, declaring that the World Cup is a mega-event that serves a rich minority, we have not adequately considered the strategies employed by our movements for social change. We have not asked how these movements could be harnessed to challenge the enemy, neo-liberalism, that we are criticising.

The Left has failed to confront that neo-liberalism can never be critiqued to death, but can only be destroyed through the strategic mobilisation and action of the

masses. In part as a result of this, the Left has been unable to pose a real threat to neo-liberalism. Also we should not view the employment of repression by the state as a sign that neo-liberalism is under threat – see my previous *SALB 34.1* article.

The APF is an important example because it has been one of the most effective organisations in the past ten years to provide community-based activists with an anti-capitalist political ideology. But, the APF's uncritical adoption of affiliates and perhaps because it is a 'Forum', has meant it has placed too much emphasis on the autonomy of local community-based affiliates. The need for autonomy has come at the expense of coordinated and strategic action that poses a sustained threat to national policies.

In order to grasp this, we must keep in mind that the APF and other social movement's banners, t-shirts and websites do not tell the complete truth, nor do they contribute to challenging the hegemony of the ANC.

The extent of the problem was displayed vividly through the Alexandra Vukuzenzele Crisis Committee (AVCC), a local affiliate of the APF in a township 20kms north east of Johannesburg. The AVCC's struggle for housing has been framed on the APF's website as one that contests the divide between rich and poor. However, a march captured on film two weeks prior to the xenophobic attacks in 2008 shows members of the AVCC wearing APF t-shirts and vowing to evict Zimbabweans from the RDP

houses in extension 7 on the edges of Alexandra.

This does not mean that the AVCC is a xenophobic organisation. In fact, its partial success lies in its of *non-violent* direct action in the form of house occupations to force the government to concede to its demands. However, its members are, like many other organisations, prone to conservative elements and disconnected from the APF's anti neo-liberal ideology.

This is not an isolated problem, though the development trajectory of APF local affiliates varies.

Other APF affiliates, such as the Backyard Dwellers Association in Midrand (between Johannesburg and Pretoria) want the same houses that shack dwellers in a nearby informal settlement have been allocated. This suggests that the poor are battling with each other for basic services such as housing instead of forming a united front that could challenge neo-liberalism.

The CDL is a newer formation which seeks unity among the Left nationwide. It has issued pamphlets which demand that the priorities of the nation be to 'Listen to the People: To Place their Needs at the Centre of Transformation', but as yet it is not clear whether or how it will go about forcing those in power to do this.

I have been a driver behind another less known formation, the Community Development Forum (CDF), which has held several meetings in central Johannesburg over the past few months. The Forum emerged prior to the World Cup in an attempt to coordinate militant actions among poor community-based organisations in Gauteng such as the Landless People's Movement, and other

more independent civics in Balfour and Alexandra.

The CDF attempted to facilitate a series of decentralised militant actions in local areas which would simultaneously undertake protests (possibly road occupations) leading up to the World Cup under the banner 'Protest or Die in Poverty: The World Cup Benefits the Rich and not the Poor'. The idea underpinning this was that centralised marches would involve high transport costs that poor people do not have, while decentralised marches with a common memorandum and strategy could take place with no financial resources. However, the leadership was unable to get enough support and lacked the confidence to make this possible.

Rather than celebrate and romanticise these movements, we must learn from the experiences and mistakes of formations like the CDL, CDF and APF. We must view them not as having the answers but more as embryos of people's power which need to develop to have substantial impact on policies.

The challenge we face now is whether or not we are able to critically reflect on our past experiences or failures and use our creative energy to find new ways to harness militant and sometimes raging frustrations of communities that fight for service delivery. While it is becoming clear that there is a crisis, and that this crisis will not subside after the World Cup, what is less clear is how the Left will respond to it.

This is all the more alarming because, while the Left doesn't have a strategy to counteract welfare neo-liberalism, the ANC has a firm strategy to maintain it. ANC leaders such as President Jacob Zuma have visited militant

communities like Orange Farm and Balfour promising to deliver services. In fact, Minister Sicelo Shiceka has indicated that the people of Balfour now demarcated in Mpumalanga will be allocated to their rightful position in Gauteng. The government hopes to put out sparks in Balfour before they create a fire like the border dispute in Khutsong in 2006 which witnessed a boycott of schools and local government elections.

By making promises, and also providing a few basic concessions to the people in places like Balfour, the government hopes to control such communities.

It is time to acknowledge that we will not become real enemies of neo-liberalism by providing critiques of neo-liberalism alone in articles or pamphlets or through our assistance in legal battles or the maintenance of websites. If we, and the oppressed, continue to follow this direction, hegemony and power is likely to be maintained by the ANC.

The Left did much to critique the expenditure of billions of rands on the World Cup and also to conscientise many people, but very little to actually challenge power. This represents the inadequacies of the Left. The money has already been spent on the rich and the Left will need to think of new strategies for the future if it wants to influence the policies and practices of the powerful in the next South African mega-event. It is time to ask ourselves, as the Left: what use is it to critique an oppressor if we cannot implement a means to overthrow and replace it? LB

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