

Conference of the Left

Plenary 2 · Why Rebuild the Left, and How

Lead input: Janet Cherry on Left history, mass organisation, and mass-rooted Left renewal.

Dear comrades

I have been asked to

“address the historical lessons of Left and popular organisation in South Africa, the theoretical foundations of mass-based political work, and what those lessons demand of the Left in the present period of fragmentation and reaction”

I will start with Section 5 of the Concept note which states that

The 1994 breakthrough dismantled formal apartheid, extended political rights.... But **it left economic power intact: ownership stayed concentrated....**and later “Organised working class power has weakened” – as addressed by comrades in the previous session. The left is divided and fragmented. And yet we have the political space to build a united movement of the left, the working class, the progressive forces.

USE THE SPACE

Who do I represent? The Amandla collective in Gqeberha; the Transition Township project of Nelson Mandela University, which is piloting sustainable development and social ownership through energy, food and waste cooperative. I am a Marxist scholar and an ecosocialist, and I am also an ANC veteran.

I will not repeat the political economy analysis that has been given. Some reflections:

We have not used the space that was won through the liberation struggle. There is a vibrant and independent civil society and an unusual amount of freedom to organise, to speak out, to campaign, and to build alternatives.

There are many important experiences and some victories both in the liberation struggle and since 1994 – both through the state (LRA etc) and through popular struggles (SANCO land occupations, Soweto ECC, TAC, Fees must Fall) to learn from.

The former liberation movement party (ANC – including communists in government) – are increasingly distanced from grassroots struggles and often label civil society as counter revolutionary, anti transformation, or funded by imperialists.

When the poor take initiative (zamazamas, illegal connections, informal settlements etc) they are criminalised.

The divisions in the left and of the working class – which includes migrant workers from neighbouring countries and rural provinces – benefits the exploiters.

Here I must comment on the current crisis. Last year I warned of the dangers of xenophobic populism, in the context of Operation Vala Umgodi, and the deaths of more than 96 people in that brutal SAPS operation. Those who died were men from Lesotho and Mozambique, some of the poorest countries in the world, for 100 years part of the migrant labour system that built the wealth of this country. They worked in dangerous conditions trying to earn something to feed their families, and died in a terrible way as a result of this government operation. Yet nobody has been held to account. Despite petitions to the ANC, to the HRC and to Parliament, nobody has been held to account. Their lives do not matter. This is xenophobia. Government action in this way reinforced the dangerous populist movement which is now spreading across the country.

Unity of the working class is paramount. Hence it is very disappointing that MACUA and SAFTU are not here. MACUA has been championing the cause of miners, formal and informal, and mining affected communities.

Yesterday we heard of the assassination of cde Mokoena Letsie, an activist from the Solidarity Action Committee collective working in informal settlements.

Yesterday there was a protest against Total and teach-in of environmental movements, calling for fossil-fuel free SA. Yet we know there is a division in the working class about this: unions resist the transition while communities affected by coal emissions support it. Palestine solidarity activists call for

end to export of coal, while unions and government defend the coal industry.

South Africa has a highly centralised economy as noted in the concept note – hence BEE has not worked to distribute economic power.

The experiments with popular power of the 1980s did not extend to economic power and there have been very few attempts to create worker ownership and community economies.

The fragmentation of the left is also reflected in fragmented and isolated pockets of implementation of food sovereignty, energy communities, land occupations and production cooperatives. The Saltuba energy cooperative, the Khenana commune, the Eastern Cape Agro-ecology network have limited impact, and urgently need to be mainstreamed.

HOWEVER:

The experiences of building popular power and grassroots participation in working class townships can still be drawn upon.

The experiences of the BCM in the 1970s and NUM in 1980s in self-sufficiency and creating worker cooperatives need to be learned from

This is the starting point of my intervention in this conference: We have not used the space. How do we build alternative power, distribute economic power, take social and working-class ownership of the means of production – in other words, build socialism from below?

I have also been asked to address alternative approaches to development, to address issues ‘coming from the ground’. This is the obvious path of action: to meet the needs, create an economy in the hands of the people. Marry the theory to the practice: this is what we will deal with in Commission B tomorrow. What are the prefigurative strategies for building socialism today? The emphasis is on economic power, not on state power, not on protest.

BUILD HEGEMONY

The theoretical foundation of this is Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Hegemony is class power: in this case, the extension of working-class influence so that the agenda of the working class becomes the agenda of

the whole society. It means overcoming poverty, inequality and unemployment through changing the economic system: whether you call it radical economic transformation, economic freedom, socialism, ecosocialism, democratic socialism, African socialism, solidarity economy, economic justice...or don't label it at all. The assumption is that this can be done, to a certain extent, within the current capitalist economy, and that real material gains can be made. This involves prefigurative strategies – strategies to create the basis of the new society that we imagine is possible. So that we can see what is possible, even in the current situation. But power is taken, never given, as the slogan goes.

This involves building a **mass movement from below**

A movement definition: “Sustained mobilisation around a strategy to achieve an objective”

with a couple of **strategic tools**:

1. Firstly the building of **maximum unity around a common programme or demand**– using the ‘Spectrum of Allies’ exercise;
2. secondly the strategy in relation to the state, using the framework of **‘with, against and apart from’ the state.**

i. ‘spectrum of allies’ exercise – draw broadest possible range of allies closer; win over those closest; neutralise those ‘inbetween’; isolate the opponent. This is not ‘class collaborationist’.

- Identify the issues/interests in common and build campaign around these
- Don't waste time fighting the ‘inbetweens’
- Don't get caught up with demanding agreement on everything

ii. ‘With, against and apart from the state’

The strategy for any campaign depends on

- Alliances in government (political parties) and
- Allies in government and
- The strength of organisation at the grassroots

With the state: Identify levels/departments of government for particular campaigns; identify allies within the state, within the administration and within the parties in the local government

LEARN FROM OUR OWN HISTORY

What can we learn from our own history?

The slogan of this conference is 'Building a Left Movement for Working Class and Popular Power'.

- i. Start with the labour movement and the building of working class power

Go back to 1970s, draw on Rick Turner's philosophy of workers control, and the building of independent black trade unions. Let me give one example of mobilisation:

- The Red Meat Boycott (1980) Western Cape townships

Demand: Recognition of the union by meat bosses

Spectrum of allies: WPGWU + civics + WC traders + student formations (non-racial)

Tactic: boycott of red meat; international pressure re labour rights

Outcome: failure BUT

Established legitimacy of union, independence, internal democracy, building of alliances with working class leadership, respect for worker leadership.

Labour + community solidarity built

FOSATU unions + 'Populist' unions together in COSATU by 1985

- ii. Building popular power through the UDF in the 1980s

At the MACUA meeting on 'Reclaiming accountability, movement power and political economy of civil society' on Wednesday 27 May, one participant argued that we need a broader movement of the working class, a 'UDF of the working class'.

- The United Democratic Front and the building of popular power in Cradock

The UDF was not built from the top down, but emerged from the bring together of many small and localised organisational initiatives and mobilisations at grassroots level.

Hundreds of local township civic organisations organised around local demands using Philippines 'Organising People for Power' manual from 1978. How to identify an issue that affects people directly, how to confront authority, make small victories, build confidence among the oppressed. Tactics eg consumer boycott, which was particularly effective in Port Elizabeth, put pressure on the white business led Chamber of Commerce to put pressure on national government.

In Cradock, Matthew Goniwe – a Marxist, an underground communist, practised 'extreme democracy'. It began with setting up reading groups, then building a powerful civic organisation around rentals in Lingelihle, followed by structures of popular power through street committees, a youth organisation, COSAS taking up school demands, adult literacy classes using the Freirian method, and training in organisational skills; through this the comrades created 'counter power' that was hegemonic in the townships of that part of the Eastern Cape.

At National level, the UDF mobilised around the common demand versus the tricameral parliament and the Black Local Authorities. There were debates in Cape Town: who should be included? White students – the 'children of the bourgeoisie'? the traders associations? But both were included on the basis of broadest unity, nonracialism. Sometimes in conflict with AZAPO, AmaAfrika. Maintenance of unity of oppressed is difficult, the building of unity sometimes painful. Yet, this movement gained momentum until elements of people's power were present, townships were ungovernable, street and area committees had effective control over neighbourhoods, self-defence units acted to protect communities.

In the apartheid era: we mobilised 'against the state'; and 'apart from the state' in very limited instances.

In the post-1994 era: social movements have been combining 'against the state' and 'with the state' ; or 'apart from the state' again, in very limited instances.

- Treatment Action Campaign: Arguably the most significant movement in post-apartheid era, bringing about policy change which saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Ten year campaign using multiple tactics.
- Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee: Important movement – against and apart from the state.

STRUGGLES AND STRATEGIES FOR THE CURRENT CONJUNCTURE:

One of the briefs for Commission B on strategies was to examine “Development alternatives”. I argue that the potential exists for creating a ‘distributive economy’ at local level.

Informalisation allows for decentralised localised economies controlled by workers and communities.

Technology allows for coordination and decentralised institutions (finance, production, services) controlled at the grassroots.

Sustainability and climate change require solutions which are localised, based on our own resources, and provide for people’s needs rather than for profit – energy, water, land are all plentiful in SA – these are ‘commons’ which can be used sustainably (permaculture principle is to create more energy than you use; agroecology principle – integrated systems)

There are limitations to protests or campaign against the government; we need to move away from ‘statist’ solutions and ‘export driven market’ solutions (Gas, manganese and GH2 exports do not/will not benefit the poor)

The strategic focus should be to build durable and decentralised economic power from below – the solidarity economy, a co-operative movement, local living economies, soviets, social ownership models, asset based community development.

How do we do this?

‘With the state’

EXAMPLE – PILOT PROJECT – SALTUBA ENERGY COOPERATIVE

Saltuba Energy Cooperative in Kwazakhele, Nelson Mandela Bay – ally within municipal electricity department – use of public open space in townships for energy and food production.

- Work with local govt where possible, housing, electricity, water, waste cooperatives.
- **Building productive cooperatives at neighbourhood level into a cooperative movement**

- “One Community, One Cooperative” slogan – however look at Transition Township, Kwazakhele, Nelson Mandela Bay: potential for 25 000 h/h organised into 120 neighbourhood ‘gap tap’ primary cooperatives, using gap taps for integrated production of electricity, food, waste recycling. Integrate into secondary cooperatives to create economies of scale, providing services and food for local market.
- Informal settlements: Sustainable Settlement Pilot Project – pilot for settlements of between 500 and 1 000 h/h. Organised into cluster development either in-situ or on vacant land, self-build housing cooperatives around common infrastructure, using local materials for construction, integrated and sustainable services provision using renewable energy, water capture, waste recycling, waste to energy (gas) etc.
- Participate in IDP processes – identify vacant land; plans for service provision, form community cooperatives to access state funding for service provision.

What we are advocating is premised on localised control over resources, in particular to meet basic needs. This means energy (through renewables) and food (through control over land and water), as well as the circular economy model which involves the re-use and recycling of waste to energy and useful products.

What this requires from the state: changes in procurement policy/MFMA to allow for community participation, local procurement; municipal IDPs and ermissions for land use; systems of municipal accounting.

EXAMPLES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES: BE AMBITIOUS!

‘With the state’

- Kerala, India

‘With the state’: The model of decentralised and democratic local control over resources within the context of a nation-state such as India provides important strategic lesson for South Africa.

Since the 1970s, when Kerala had its first communist government, it has been seen as a model for redistributive development which meets basic needs. The model is essentially one of decentralisation to local government and maximum participation in decision-making by local residents. Drawing on their long traditions of village-level participatory democracy combined with state support for health care and education, they have managed to cope far better than far wealthier societies, and even to care for the tens of thousands of migrant workers who have come into the poor rural province during the pandemic (Cherry in *African Communist*, 2021:72).

The key lesson is that the left inside government/the state and the left outside need to work together.

‘Against, apart from and with the state

- MST, Brazil

This is a very important example for South Africa as it relates to the demand for land. Depending on party in power (PT of Lula etc) it made significant gains by organising from below. It began with the occupation of unused farm land and the establishment of settlements. Conflict with the state, protests, eventual agreements with government; it has resulted in the establishment of sustainable settlements, production cooperatives, schools and a range of services.

The movement's entire production network operates through a structured, collective economy that includes: **185 Cooperatives**: Managing large-scale production, technical assistance, and commercialization.

- **1,900 Productive Associations**: Smaller, localized collective farming groups within encampments and settlements.

- **120 to 140 Agro-industries:** Small to medium-scale processing factories for milk, maize, fruit, and meat processing.

South Africa has seen nothing like this. The **SACP Red Caravan** is on the right track but needs to work with and learn from other movements and networks, including MACUA, Abahlali baseMjondolo, SANCO, E Cape Agro Ecology Network and the **SA Food Sovereignty Campaign** – to coordinate around common objectives; and learn about sustainable production methods.

Against: Make demands of the state **which can be met**; tactics eg withdraw payment for services. Protests are only effective in drawing attention to immediate problem. The focus should be on medium -term gains through allies in policy making at national level and implementation at local level.

Apart from: If no response to short term demands or requests, to take control of land, water, electricity connections, grow food, set up cooperatives, markets, building coops. This is the ‘autonomous’ option. However it can come into conflict with the state.

EXAMPLE: Abahlali baseMjondolo **eKhenhana Commune** in Cato Manor

But: **Apart from the state – the autonomous option – is inherently limited.** In the current situation, there are only isolated, fragmented attempts to build food sovereignty, energy co-operatives etc.

Movements and organisations need to **look for allies in the state, to make demands that can be met, and to build power apart from the state.** This means building grassroots organisations under democratic control, not dependent on outside sources or the state.

We need to reclaim the traditions of people’s power, including the practices of participatory and direct democracy, and to reinvent the old strategies and apply them to our new contexts. In neighbourhoods, in townships, this means local organisation around local needs. But it means more than making demands (either politely, through the IDP process, or less politely, through protest at the councillor’s office). It means going beyond demanding that our municipalities ‘deliver something’ to us, to us taking back ‘the commons.’ If you are a communist, you may prefer the language of taking control over the means of production; if you are not a communist, the language of asset based community development will do as well. What

it really involves is ordinary people ('the community' or 'the working class') making productive use of local resources. This is "Socialism from below"

STRUGGLES and STRATEGIES (for Day 2 Commission)

Amandla Gqeberha Collective statement:

"Unite around common struggles and shared material interests"

"Building campaigns and movement that advances working class solidarity, collective ownership, and democratic control over the economy and society"

"Social ownership of the means of production and democratic cooperatives that place people and community before profit".

Who to organise?

Precariat, unemployed, marginalised, immigrants: **"Cry of the Excluded"**

Informal settlements – occupying land, building shelters, connecting to electricity – criminalised, moved off unsuitable land, on endless waiting lists for government provided housing

Zamazamas – using skills and resources from disused mines, exploited, criminalised

Workers in sweatshops – exploited, unorganised

Waste pickers, security guards, spaza shop owners – precariat

Communities in closed down mines and factories, communities in environmentally damaged areas, communities with land under threat

Women in food businesses – chickens, vetkoek etc

Township residents who have housing and services and land but no jobs, no source of livelihood, no income, who are dependent on grants.

Key Campaigns and Demands:

UBIG plus FREE ELECTRICITY plus FREE DATA/INTERNET ACCESS

- **Access to data, free broadband in all townships and public spaces**

The use of new technology and sustainable energy production to decentralise ownership has become possible.

Examples are the establishment of the ISP cooperative in rural Eastern Cape

<https://theconversation.com/how-a-rural-community-built-south-africas-first-isp-owned-and-run-by-a-cooperative-87448>

the SORE cooperative in Kwazakhele, as described above and in

<https://oxpeckers.org/2025/07/people-who-own-the-sun-2/>

The technology of AI and blockchain allows for socially owned and controlled businesses, banking, markets and service provision. We are no longer dependent on centralised banks, commercial distribution companies or energy production.

(See Patrick Brennan input on technology potential: ‘Managing Capital in the Age of Intelligent Machines: Towards a 21st Century Strategic Role of Communist, Democratic Socialist and other Developmental Formations of the Left).

- **Free Basic Electricity:** There are proposals in government for a new regulation which will increase the allocation of Treasury-funded FBE to 200 kW FBE across the board. This needs to be demanded, implemented and monitored.
- **Socially Owned Renewable Energy:** Secondly, an important issue is the impending unbundling of Eskom. The SAWEM is happening; this is the implementation of the liberalised market for electricity; it is a done deal. Municipalities are struggling. However, this cannot be simply rejected as ‘privatisation. There is potential for SORE, for participation of workers and communities in owning the means of energy production. **The concept of ‘socialist unbundling’ is to be explored.**

Land:

There is agreement across the left on the demand but not on the strategy.

- **Use of public unutilised land and factories** (eg gap taps, edge of townships, school grounds etc) for food production; local markets;

food processing; food sovereignty; occupation of unutilised factories and buildings for productive use

- **Urban land for settlement:** expropriation of unutilised land, establishment of ‘site and service’ settlements, community planning, cooperative building and service provision (can be done under policy frameworks of EPHP etc), integrated clinics, childcare, recreation facilities managed by community/cooperatives
- **Waste to value:** waste to energy, to food production, to production of other goods.
- **Integrated localised production** of food, energy, building materials (bricks from waste), other useful goods (from waste plastic)
- **Community housing cooperatives** – making materials, building, along lines of EPHP, SSPP

The above campaigns and strategies to be combined with a **UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME GRANT** and the building of a **CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT**.

COUNTER-HEGEMONY:

2023 – in the book ‘Labour Disrupted’ – I argued the need for a counter-hegemonic project, and asked the question ‘who will lead such a project?’. We looked at the grassroots social movements and their relationship to labour movements, as well as their relationship to formal politics of representation and policy making. The conclusion was as follows:

“...a strategy of working within the constraints of parliamentary democracy, flawed as it is, and using the space it allows the working class (both employed and unemployed) to engage in strategic building of counter-hegemony through socialist experiments on the ground. This does not mean that a single popular movement is necessary or desirable; there may be a multiplicity of social movements contesting power in different spaces and around different issues. This does not mean electoral politics, nor taking ‘centres of power’ in government or even in local government, but rather building independent worker controlled institutions that are not in direct conflict with existing laws and policies. Using available land, resources and infrastructure – the abandoned schools, the dumpsites, the hundreds of thousands of municipal houses that are now owned by the working class, the water and electricity infrastructure which is accessed to

advantage by the middle class – it may be possible for the working class to take some decentralised control over aspects of the economy. Through such movements, the hegemony of the ruling class is ...indirectly challenged, a subtler and less obviously revolutionary process of building the institutions of a different society and a different economy, more appropriate for the future. The challenge is not to build a working class political party, but rather to mobilise the working class around the material issues of the day”. (2023:246).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

This is my final point. The big question to be asked in relation to the Conference of the Left and the building of a mass working class movement is the following:

Will the SACP’s participation in the local government elections detract from building such a movement, or will it be an effective tool to mobilise the working class around specific demands? Will the emphasis be on obtaining council seats, and influencing the ANC through alliances with it or other political parties on particular issues, or will it be on building the mass movement and empowering the working class communities at the grassroots? Can the strategy encompass building power from below in strategic campaigns – as will be discussed in the Conference of the Left – AS WELL AS obtaining very limited state power at local level, through obtaining one or two seats on local councils?

The two strategies are not necessarily incompatible; but a question both of capacity and of strategic emphasis – to be part of the state (as the SACP has been for thirty years, with limited results) or to work outside the state in different ways (as in the ‘with, against and apart from the state’ analysis).

For the SACP election campaign, **are the positions advanced by the SACP in line with the campaigns and demands emerging from the grassroots?** If the Conference of the Left can bring about such an alignment, it would **enable a marriage of the strategies of grassroots power and participation in local government.**

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i. Janet Cherry (published papers):

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ii. Other sources and documents:

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Janet Cherry

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