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South Africa

Zabala for Socialism - Building Towards a Movement for Socialism

- Features -

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South Africa is in a deep crisis, where the real and persistent failures of capitalism threaten a descent into barbarism and the destruction of life. In the debris of anti-capitalist politics in South Africa, a new spark has been lit to unite the left and to contribute to the building of a mass movement for socialism. We have formed Zabalaza for Socialism to pioneer a new democratic, grassroots-oriented politics. It breaks with the authoritarian, top-down politics, which has characterised much of the post-Apartheid left. Zabalaza for Socialism (ZASO) wants to give meaning to the slogan under which it was born, Socialism means freedom.

Another world is possible – a joyful, creative, new world which emancipates us all from oppression and frees us all from exploitation, and where we live in harmony with nature and one another. This is socialism! This is worth fighting and sacrificing for.

This is what 120 delegates, coming from different parts of the country, resolved when they gave birth to ZASO - an eco-socialist, feminist and anti-racist organisation. The launch conference of ZASO took place in Johannesburg from 14 - 16 December 2023. The outstanding business of the Conference was completed over 15 - 17 March 2024.

30 years of democracy: crisis not freedom

For three decades of neoliberal rule, the interests of the mass of oppressed and exploited people have been sacrificed in favour of capital and the market. That is the reason we see collapse almost everywhere. Mass unemployment, extreme poverty and inequality have enveloped our country in a cycle of violence, corruption and crime.

In this situation, racism, sexism and violence against women, xenophobia and homophobia are taking root in the consciousness of millions of South Africans, disorganising, dividing and creating despair. The project of uniting South Africa as a non-racial, non-sexist society is in ruins. The country must be rebuilt. An alternative to capitalism and the market is urgent. A broad movement for socialism, which unites urban and rural people, employed and unemployed, women and youth will be a vital step towards socialist renewal. We know a long road lies ahead and there are no short cuts. A movement for socialism has to be built on the foundation of reconstructed and renewed grassroots popular movements and worker-controlled trade unions.

Challenging neoliberalism

Mass unemployment is the greatest threat to social cohesion. Almost 50% of the work force is unemployed. It is not foreign nationals who take the jobs of South Africans; it is the owners of capital who hoard their capital in idle bank accounts, or off-shore their loot in tax havens. There has been systematic capital flight over the last 30 years. That is what lies behind the process of deindustrialisation and the destruction of jobs in critical and strategic industries. The government's neoliberal policy has choked and undermined state investment in the economy.

A new wave of retrenchments is taking place as the economy stagnates. Mining, manufacturing and even agricultural

jobs are being shed. Public sector jobs are also being shed as the government implements very harsh budget cuts. South Africa's creditors have demanded that the public sector wage bill be reduced. This is being achieved through the freezing of jobs in the public sector.

Austerity is leading to the collapse of service provision. Workers and the unemployed need to unite in resisting it. An anti-austerity movement must demand taxing the rich and ensuring the redistribution of wealth from the 10% of South Africans who own 90% of the country's assets. The rich have turned to private health, education and security for their well-being; hence their hostility to paying more in taxes, and their relative immunity from the effects of the crumbling state. They use the corruption in the state sector to mobilise support for privatisation. And their narrative is winning. Even within the working classes, the idea of defending the public sector is drowned out by the corruption narrative. The ideal South African is no longer the citizen, but the consumer, and "the South African dream" is to opt out of state support in favour of private services.

And yet, corruption is an outcome of the failure to redistribute wealth. The new black capitalist class is desperate to grow and accumulate, but it is restricted by big capital and its monopoly hold over the commanding heights of the economy. As the representative of this class, the ruling African National Congress directs state policy and resources, especially state procurement and the tender system, towards supporting this section of the predatory elite. An orgy of corruption results, as the intense competition for tenders requires the buying of influence in the state. Fronting by so-called white capital is not an insignificant component of this systemic corruption enveloping the state.

ZASO opposes the tender system; it is this outsourcing of state functions that provides the myriad of opportunities for corruption. The state must in-source workers to undertake public work, especially the construction and maintenance of vital infrastructure for the improvement of the lives of the poor. Substantial public administration reform is also necessary to rebuild state capacity. Housing, schools, hospitals and clinics need to be built; water, electricity and sewage systems need urgent repair. Unemployed workers must be hired and trained to do this work. A mass housing programme, expansion of cheap, efficient, PUBLIC transport, land redistribution and support for small scale farmers, the roll out of cultural and sport programmes – these are the pillars of an economic renewal and mass employment programme.

This is not socialism, but these constitute some of the most important reforms for strengthening the position of workers in ways that advance the struggle for socialism.

ZASO and the 2024 elections

Unlike the plethora of recently formed political parties, ZASO's primary focus is extra-parliamentary resistance to big business and the neoliberal state. This does not imply that we ignore parliament and the electoral process. This is a critical site of struggle. The left and popular movements need to rebuild democratic grassroots and workplace organisations to effectively participate in elections. We therefore resolved not to rush into a process which requires extensive preparation, organisation and resources. The left cannot afford another disaster where it fails to gain significant electoral support.

We recognise that the 2024 elections are an important turning point. Many polls predict that the ANC will not achieve a 50% majority, which would require a coalition government. There is a great danger that such a government will be more aggressively neoliberal, anti-working class and xenophobic. Even more dangerous is a coalition with populist parties who champion "radical economic transformation" but whose real agenda is to finance a predatory black elite. The era of coalitions will usher in greater instability and political crisis.

We are not in a position to call for a vote for any of the parties standing. Nor do we call for a boycott of the elections. We call on our members to support those parties who oppose dividing the working class (through sexism, racism and xenophobia) and who stand in defence of democracy.

For a new Pan-Africanism

Socialism is an international struggle based on the building of solidarity between the exploited and oppressed everywhere. In South Africa, a key starting point is building unity and friendship with our African brothers and sisters who have fled war, dictatorships and the unfolding climate emergency on our continent. Fighting xenophobia is a vital part of advancing working class unity.

The need for a new Pan-Africanism is urgent. For some time, we have been witnessing the new scramble for Africa, which is fuelling a wave of conflicts across the continent –in Sudan, in the DRC and in Mozambique, for example. While many of these conflicts are related to new oil and gas finds, an increasing focus is the race to control and extract rare earth minerals and other critical minerals (cobalt, copper, lithium, platinum) for low carbon technologies needed for the ‘green economy’ in the advanced economies.

Africa is once again a theatre of inter-imperialist rivalry, where the new Cold War plays out. Supporting our African brothers and sisters in these and other struggles is the start, but not the end, of our internationalism. A new Pan-Africanism must be built by supporting the grassroots efforts of ordinary people to achieve real political and economic self-determination. There will be no liberation “by proxy,” by siding with the growing power of one capitalist camp against the other, whether in the East or West —the working classes and the left have to wage a struggle against them all.

Free Palestine

Solidarity with Palestine is a life and death issue as the Israeli government is equipped and supported by its Western backers to inflict genocide on the people of Gaza. The Zionist state has illegally occupied Palestine since 1948. Palestinians have the right to resist the continuous theft of their land, violence and oppression. While the South African government should be commended for taking Israel to the International Court of Justice, it is not enough. South Africa needs to cut all ties with Israel. ZASO fully supports Palestinian solidarity initiatives, and the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions campaign.

Threat of imperialist rivalries

ZASO decries the growing trend of the left to sacrifice working class solidarity in favour of a ‘campist’ politics based on my enemy’s enemy is my friend. We share nothing in common with the reactionary and sub-imperialist power of Russia. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is an extension of the regime’s domestic policies of dictatorial rule, where basic democratic rights are violated, and the rights of different nationalities are suppressed. The invasion of Ukraine is an imperialist adventure and cannot be justified by the threat of NATO expansion. ZASO believes we must stand with the people of Ukraine to resist the invasion of their country. This does not, however, imply support for the reactionary Zelensky regime.

Intense competition between different blocs of capital, especially between the United States of America and China, between Europe and Russia, between capital in the Global North and the Global South. is leading to devastating wars in many parts of the world. Capital accumulation in China, not people-to-people solidarity, lies behind China's Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure development strategy to invest in more than 150 countries. This, in turn, contributes to a new stage of inter-imperialist rivalry, as the West seeks to contain China's growing power .

Eco-socialism

Humanity and all the species on our planet are faced with an existential crisis. The expansion of capitalism to every corner of the globe, and the commodification of almost everything, including large parts of nature, have created an ecological crisis which is suffocating life. The climate emergency is the most pressing of the many ecological disasters we face, not least bio-diversity, fertility of the soils, acidification of the sea and fresh water resources.

Our socialism is for the butterflies and the frogs and all life forms threatened by destructive and polluting capitalism. We know very well that poor people, at work and in the community, are the first victims of the famines, floods, droughts and cyclones of the climate and other ecological crises. Resisting privatisation and fighting for expansion of public goods are critical to halt climate change, both to have the capacity to protect the climate and to win workers to the cause.

A movement for socialism is desperately and urgently needed in the face of capitalism's worldwide destruction of the foundations of life. But it is possible only if the practices, strategies and perspectives of socialism are renewed.

A long and bumpy road lies ahead to ensure a socialist future. This is why we have come together to launch Zabala for Socialism - so we can build it now. Build it in the movements we are active in; and also build it in our practice. Importantly, this means building it in our relations and solidarity with one another.

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