



---

# South Africa: A New Politics From the Left?

By Niall Reddy



Over the last decade, the Left in a number of Western countries has undergone a historic transition from “protest to politics,” to borrow the words of the late Canadian Marxist Leo Panitch and his frequent co-author Sam Gindin. From Podemos in Spain to Sanders in the United States, a new wave of parties and electoral coalitions have emerged and made rapid gains. Despite setbacks and defeats, Panitch and Gindin’s indispensable analysis of these events in *The Socialist Challenge Today*, casts them in an unambiguously positive light. None of the examples they study offer formulas for resolving the vexing dilemmas facing the socialist movement in our globalised present.

But in their determination to take state power seriously they constitute an unmistakable step forward, after decades in which the Left’s confinement to episodic instances of mobilisation left the electoral field wide open to the parties of business. Part of this “new new” Left’s success stems from a willingness to shake free of its own past. Building a viable socialism of the 21st century, they argue, requires dispensing with the outmoded parts of the Leninist model, like its wager on insurrection, while retaining that which still holds value, like its internationalist spirit.

These developments hold important lessons for us on the South African Left. Just under a decade ago it seemed that we were on the verge of effecting a similar transition “from protest to politics.” During the first decade and a half of democracy, a socialist opposition had found a locus in the so-called “new” social movements—like the Anti-Privatisation Forum—which grew in reaction to various parts of the ruling African National Congress’ neoliberal agenda.

These waged a number of important defensive struggles and scored a few key victories but fundamentally did nothing to loosen capital's grip on policymaking. By the end of the 2000s most were a spent force. It became clear to a growing segment of the Left that lasting gains would not be achieved unless social agitation were more effectively linked with efforts to seize governing power. The ability to think these more ambitious terms received a major boost when the National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (NUMSA), the nation's largest manufacturing union, appeared to redraw the political map of the country by breaking from the ANC, amidst a wave of working class militancy.

Of course for the "official" left which NUMSA represented there had never been any turn away from politics as such. But decades of compromise had bred a form of politics that had become completely unmoored from the guiding thread of class antagonism. NUMSA's move thus constituted a kind of mirror image transition—from a back-room corporatism to a politics more grounded in the methods and spirit of "protest". This is what imbued the "NUMSA moment" with such hope—it promised to re-connect the two sides of South Africa's bifurcated Left, and supply the strategic elements that had been missing from each. By matching the militancy and class-independence of the social movement Left with structural and organisational might of the "official" Left, it seemed possible that a mass socialist movement could be rapidly brought into being.

That was not to be. From today's vantage it's impossible to regard the NUMSA moment as anything but an abject failure. The political party which eventually issued from it is the farthest cry from the unifying force that so many had hoped for. While the international left has been able to advance by breaking with its shibboleths, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) has fallen back on a slavish appropriation of Bolshevik ideology, almost comical in its extremes.

Despite enormous resources, a large part supplied by a US-based billionaire, the party ran a dismal general election campaign in 2019 where it failed to get even a tenth of NUMSA's own membership to vote for it (it ultimately only amassed 25 000 votes nationally, below the threshold to obtain one seat in Parliament). It's since never recovered, joining a host of other failed socialist parties on the margins of political life. Marginality seems in turn to have degraded the internal culture of the party, which now resembles closely the Stalinism of the ANC-aligned South African Communist Party in all its worst aspects.

The floundering of the NUMSA moment is a terrible blow. But the setback inflicted on us will far greater if we fail to draw the correct lessons from it. Perhaps the most worrying outcome is that it precipitates a slide back into movementism, and shuts the window that we've had to execute the transition from "protest to politics." Party politics acquired a bad name during the era of "protest" in South Africa, and many on the Left already feel that the SRWP's example vindicated their worst suspicions.

But what the SRWP actually reveals to us is are not flaws inherent in the party-form as such, so much as the limits of a certain kind of party, one founded on a hidebound Leninism. If the Left were to abandon party building altogether there would, quite simply, be no socialist future. All visions of radical change that eschew parties and an active takeover of the state suffer from a principal defect in that they misconceive the nature of class formation—the process by which individuals become aware of their class position and begin to articulate their politics through it. This is presented as a quasi-automatic effect of the capitalist class structure.

But history offers no support for such a view. Class is impactful because it frames the options we have over so many major decisions in our lives—but not so narrowly as to make resistance to one's employer, or the system behind him, inevitable. Indeed, the extreme vulnerability of workers under capitalism means that individualised modes of coping tend to be more commonplace than collective action. That's why socialist consciousness has been the exception rather than the norm in the global

history of capitalism, and exceedingly rare in the absence of a well-organised party. As Panitch argued with the force of a life's work—parties make classes as much as they are made by them.

Thankfully, an outright repudiation of the party-form is not really where we are at in South Africa. The variant of movementism which took hold here, and which has revived in the aftermath of the NUMSA moment, was not really this more extreme kind, which denies the ultimate need for a party. Rather what it advocates is a downgrading of the role of party building or its deferral to some indefinite future.

What seems to be the common premise for this position is that party building can only succeed when perfectly timed to the right “objective conditions” —conditions which are only likely to form in the wake of a rupture moment defined by intensified street-level mobilisation. Only the transformation of mass consciousness brought about by such an episode of struggle can furnish the base for a party. Moreover, efforts to “impose” a party on the working class before this are liable to be rejected by its most conscious and active layers. Cut off from nourishing energy of grassroots movements, they are likely to grow in authoritarian directions. The task of socialists in the present, therefore, is devote ourselves to strengthening movements, and hope that a party may gestate from within them in some future context.

Related but distinguishable from this, is an ingrained hostility on the South African Left towards electoral politics. This view tends to draw a sharp line between the electoral arena and movements. While movements unlock popular power by sensitising their participants to their potential for collective action, elections offer no such platform for consciousness-raising. Instead, they tend to reproduce the atomisation of liberal democracy, and to fortify the myth that progress is possible within it. Moreover, movements which take the electoral road subject themselves to debilitating pressures. The logic of getting the vote tends to conflict with the logic of grassroots mobilisation, and all too often to overwhelm it.

Movementist positions contain many insights. It is wise, for example, to be attuned to the importance of ruptural breaks—the likelihood that we will ever get to a mass party simply through a molecular accretion of our ranks is slim. But the contention that movement building alone is the best way to prepare for such a rupture fails to take seriously the inherent weaknesses of social movements.

Of the numerous movements which sustained the first era of “protest” in post-Apartheid South Africa virtually none remain (barring one major exception). New ones have of course cropped up, and a tide of less organised community protests has continued unabated across the country. But these show equally little likelihood of autonomously cohering into anything bigger or more resilient.

It's now very hard to avoid the conclusion that their failures resulted from internal rather than external factors. The model underpinning them rested on localised mobilisation around immediate demands, while actively eschewing efforts to politicise a leadership layer. Some of their more excitable proponents portrayed them as crucibles of anti-capitalism, in which the mere experience of collective decision making offered a form of political education beyond what traditional forms of Left organisation could hope to match.

But in doing so they exhibited the same fallacious thinking about class formation that informs all ventures aimed at “changing the world without taking power.” Much less a break with capitalism, it's not clear that social movements even succeeded in getting most of their members to question their loyalty to the ANC. That left them prone to demobilisation and disorganisation when circumstances changed, when defeats were incurred or when key individuals drifted off or were co-opted.

One strategic upshot of this critique is that the trade-off between movement and party building posited by movementists is a false one. It's likely that there is no winning formula for transforming single issue mobilisations into lasting, mass organisations without NGOifying them. But what we can do is to ensure that the small advances made by movements each time they arise are not dissipated. After all—the notion that struggle develops consciousness is not a false, what movementists get wrong is overstating the extent to which it does so organically. Virtually every movement throws up militant leaders, who stand to become tribunes for socialist politics if they can be identified, recruited and supported appropriately. This is work that a party is best suited to undertake.

But facing up to the limits of social movements should lead us to even stronger conclusions than this. It should lead us to question the overwhelming strategic significance that they have been accorded in the politics of the “independent left.” If movements are tough to sustain and to politicise, they may not be the vehicles best suited to bringing about a political rupture or ensuring that it outcome favors the Left.

Of course this was a strategic orientation that was largely foisted on us by circumstance. The stranglehold that the Tripartite Alliance (whose third member is the Congress of South African Trade Unions) exercised on organised labour and mass politics generally left little room for an alternative. But the situation has changed. The factionalisation of the ANC, the split in COSATU and the emergence of its rival, the South African Federation of Trade Unions, have created an opening for a more militant socialism to regain a foothold in organised labour. This ought to be the clear priority of socialists.

For all its infirmities, the union movement still presents a much more promising site for grounding socialist politics in a mass base. Although this may not hold for much longer, unions remain mass membership organisations with considerable resources. Most importantly, and most differently from social movements, they have access to structural power (i.e, the power to withdraw labour and shut down the economy). Here is one insight of Leninism which time has not invalidated- that our project will most likely fail unless that structural power is at its center.

If organised labour is once again to become our strategic focal point, this strengthens the case for not consigning the party to an intangible future. The synergies between party-building and organisation building are arguably stronger in the case of unions than social movements. At a fairly abstract level, one reason for this is that union building (or revitalisation) typically relies on a few individuals being prepared to take bold action out of moral conviction. Marxists have often argued something very different—that shopfloors collectivise as soon as workers wake up to their material interests. But narrow self-interest is unlikely to ever motivate someone to take the first steps towards organising their co-workers, since doing so incurs enormous risks but yields no extra benefit—the essence of the “free-rider” problem.

Thus, it's not a coincidence that so often in history, socialists of various stripes have been significantly overrepresented among the “militant minority.” The values that draw people to the banner of socialism are often the same as those that move them to action against workplace injustices. It's also not a coincidence that a militant minority is more likely to take shape when socialist ideas are more prominent in the public realm.

Arresting the decline of South African unions, and returning them to their proud history of worker control and grassroots democracy will require a herculean organising effort. At the simplest level this is why we need an organisational vehicle that at least broadly resembles a party. Without one we have no real means of translating strategic debates into action—of coordinating our energies towards the tasks most likely to yield long-term gains.

There's therefore a case for not delaying in building a fighting organisation, that tries to cohere leading militants from workplace and community struggles around a socialist program. But such an organisation should do more. As soon as it has the numbers needed, it should seek to involve itself in elections. In all likelihood it would have to start at the local level, and logic would dictate that it seeks out community and social movement partners in doing so. But as quickly as possible it should seek to graduate to the national stage. South Africa's unusually proportional representation electoral system (which was in fact designed to provide space for smaller parties), makes this a reasonable short-term goal.

Arresting the decline of South African unions, and returning them to their proud history of worker control and grassroots democracy will require a herculean organising effort. At the simplest level this is why we need an organisational vehicle that at least broadly resembles a party.

The first thing that sceptics of this strategy tend to get wrong is that they overstate, or misunderstand, the legitimacy problem facing formal political institutions. The SRWP seems to think that any worker with lingering attachments to electoral politics is suffering from "false consciousness." But in our current circumstances, there is nothing the least bit irrational about remaining invested in the electoral arena, even while recognising the severity of its class bias. The simple reason for that, is that there is no existing social force capable of challenging state power while remaining entirely outside its institutions, nor does one show any prospect of coming into being in any foreseeable horizon. Worker organisations in SA are locked a desperate defensive struggle—not preparing to set up a parallel state.

It's not a failure of dialectical imagination that causes people to conflate politics with elections, but an appraisal of our situation that is more accurate than the one provided by the apostles of imminent revolution.

It's thus not surprising that despite the tremendous alienation produced by decades of neoliberalism, electoral movements in the West have been able to engineer a political realignment that was much deeper than what post-2008 movements were able to achieve on their own. Their location within the domain of mainstream politics provided both visibility but also a kind of credibility—they promised to take over the institutions in front of us, rather than replace them with ones we can't see and can't yet imagine. Several of these examples stood the movementist model on its head. Rather than an electoral breakthrough growing out of a period of intensified movement activity, it was the electoral arena itself that has delivered the rupture moment, the energy from which can then be filtered down to social and labour struggles.

In the process they challenged another fallacy of movementism—that the electoral arena is entirely inimical to a politics of struggle. Sanders, Corbyn, and others imbued their campaigns with a spirit of insurgency that succeeded in appealing to many otherwise turned off by politics, particularly among younger generations. Rather than sucking energy from the streets, these examples provided a renewed model of "class struggle elections" —not their own invention but one that had faded from the Left's repertoire during the era of movementism.

Class struggle elections seek to deliberately leverage electoral campaigns, and political office itself, to bolster movements. They use every platform available to raise awareness of, and encourage solidarity with, labour and social struggles. In doing so they try to inculcate the understanding that radical policies can only be won with an inside-outside strategy, in which legislators are supported and pushed forward by powerful movements. At the same time they use campaigns as tools of

organisation building.

They recruit and deploy a mass of activist to spread a socialist message, and simultaneously try to develop those activists by building political education into their activities. Done properly, this can bridge the gaps that supposedly separate movement from electoral organising, infusing the latter with a powerful sense of collectivity. That's why so many thousands of young Americans (to pick a recent example), were politically activated through their involvement in the Sanders campaign, which became a gateway to organising in their workplaces, campuses and communities.

Note that this is completely different to the SRWP's narrowly propagandistic approach to elections which didn't promote social struggles so much as fantasies of revolution, whilst denouncing 'bourgeois democracy' as a sham and doing nothing to actually win. After a predictably disastrous outcome, the party chose to compound the embarrassment, and feed into a profoundly dangerous trend by denouncing South Africa's independent election management body and claiming the result was rigged.

It's not a failure of dialectical imagination that causes people to conflate politics with elections, but an appraisal of our situation that is more accurate than the one provided by the apostles of imminent revolution.

Contrast its subsequent marginalisation with the early trajectory with the Economic Freedom Fighters (now South Africa's third-largest party), which leveraged the electoral know-how of its ex-ANCYL cadre and Malema's media savvy to run an enormously successful first campaign. It then built on the success, steadily expanding its vote share each cycle, while using parliamentary office to bolster its national profile. Sadly it drifted off the orbit of the Left along the way. But the two diverging cases provide an obvious lesson: if elections are to be useful to us, we have to show that we are capable of succeeding in them. If we can't, how on earth will we convince anyone that we're capable of transforming society from its roots up?

None of this is to suggest that the concerns movementists raise about electoral politics are meritless. It's unquestionably true that electoral competition imposes its own logic, which can be ruinous if it totally subsumes the party's strategic purview. We can trace the decline of many a worker's party, at least proximately, to misguided efforts to capture middle-class votes by abandoning a politics of class antagonism. But all socialist strategising in our dismal conjuncture is the consideration of perilous alternatives. Far better for us to confront the dangers of succumbing to a narrow electoralism than the near certitude of permanent marginalisation should we choose to abstain from mainstream politics altogether.

The NUMSA moment may have come and gone. But the many elements of the broader conjuncture which produced it, and which seemed to augur a new direction for socialist politics, persist. The Alliance coalition is in the doldrums. Expecting its inevitable demise is of course a pastime of which we "independent leftists" should now be wary. But the material facts this time really are different. The state faces a fiscal crisis that President Cyril Ramaphosa has neither the wherewithal nor the institutional tools to escape from. His factional opponents preach a "radical economic transformation" that offers nothing whatsoever to workers.

Social strains look set to keep accumulating. But assuming that any crisis they produce will automatically redound to the Left's benefit would be folly. That will only happen if we have the political vision and the organisational capacity to ensure that class becomes the fault line of social polarisation. And for that we need to face up to the challenge of constructing a new party.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

