

Letters to the Bulletin

Building socialism in South Africa

Dear Editor

I have read with keen interest the articles in the *SA Labour Bulletin* debating the crisis of socialism: what went wrong and how best to understand what socialism is. It seems, however, that the analysts have "interpreted (socialism) in various ways". This is important and enriching "...the point, however, is to change it."

I am trying to suggest that it is crucial and urgent to come up with ideas and ways of changing socialism, that is, building it on a firmer foundation. The bold and honest explanations and assessments of past approaches, misconceptions, mistakes, distortions and betrayals, have important lessons. It seems the lessons may be better applied to furthering the struggle for socialism if they are backed with strategies and tactics for building socialism in the present South African and international concrete situation.

The challenge is to restore and to enhance the mass inspiration and enthusiasm that were once the hall-mark of socialist movements in many countries of the world. To meet this challenge, socialists have to deal with the 'nuts and bolts' questions of building socialism. There are several questions that may be asked to illustrate the points at issue.

How should workers, and socialists in particular, approach such issues as the 'social contract/reconstruction accord'?

Some analysts argue workers will simply be incorporated into structures that entrench the dominance of the bosses. Is this valid?

How should socialists relate to the fears in trade union circles, whatever their foundation, that political alignment of unions is a recipe for their loss of independence?

There seems to be consensus that nationalisation does not necessarily equal socialism. Yet, what are socialist solutions to the problem posed by the twin processes of privatisation and rising unemployment? The last *SA Labour Bulletin* reports that the structures of industry are changing and new skills are required. What do socialists think this means for transforming the educational and skills-training systems?

What forms of struggle will be most effective in this situation?

Many communities are reported to have re-occupied their land and the government seeks to control both land occupation and use. What is the socialist strategy for resolving the land question in South Africa, and who will benefit?

What are socialist strategic perspectives on democratising South Africa? How are socialists to contest the basic issues involved in the "reform process"? Some analysts argue that change will come through "refolution": a combination of reform and evolution, rather than through revolution based on mass struggle. What do socialists have to say on this?

Will change be merely the growth and expansion of existing power-structures, and the incorporation of the oppressed and exploited into them without changing their substance?

Without suggesting that the socialist wheel must be re-invented,

I hope these questions will help focus attention on the need 'to take care of the socialist cents' without ignoring the pounds.
Fraternally yours

Sam Mkhabela.

*We quite agree with you -
Editor*

Dismissed worker puts his case

Dear Editor

I am a former worker of Kromberg & Schubert manufacturers of motor vehicle harnesses near East London and it is of West German origin. I was employed by this company as a despatch clerk.

On the 24th of May 1988 our shop steward was suspended without pay. In sympathy with him we decided to protest by organising some placards and displaying them.

We continued with our normal duties. Our demands were reinstatement of our shop steward and for the management to negotiate with our trade union which was NUMSA affiliated to COSATU.

The management refused our demands. At 12 midday we went to have our lunch which is half an hour. After lunch when we went to our working places the doors were all locked.

We sent some of our shop stewards to the management for an explanation. The answer we got was that we

were on strike and also doing a go-slow.

The dispute was referred to the Industrial Court after being out of the job for a year. We lost the case to our surprise. We felt that we were not given a fair trial though represented by lawyers from Bowens of Johannesburg (Advocate Eric Dane and Attorney Nick Robb). Furthermore we were told that we had no chance to



appeal.

This company, Kromberg & Schubert, showed hardline attitudes to the workers demands which exposed the hypocrisy of multinational companies pretending to promote sound labour relations in South Africa.

This company is a union basher. They were practising modern slavery. There was no sick leave, no maternity leave. A woman worked up to the ninth month. She gives birth today, tomorrow she must be at work or face dismissal. There were no loans even if your child dies.

I am asking for advice on behalf of my fellow workers. I am also asking for some addresses of some anti-apartheid organisations from

whom we can ask for solidarity, especially in West Germany and Ireland.

We were mostly women with children to feed their empty stomachs, some with no husbands and some only the sole bread winners. We have also houses to rent and some accounts to pay. We have been out of work for two-and-a-half years.

We also suspect that the company gives bad references when we apply for jobs at other places of employment. We contacted some organisations for assistance but in vain.

This company supplies harnesses for Mercedes Benz, Honda and BMW. Our trade union promised to ask for solidarity from the above companies, but did not do so. Please when publishing this letter please do not mention my name for fear of victimisation.

Yours faithfully

*Bashed worker
Mdantsane*

AUTOFLUG S.A. dispute settlement

Dear comrade

We salute and congratulate you for publishing our previous letters on Autoflug SA's union bashing tactics. We believe that those articles really changed the "heart" of Autoflug SA management in that on the 15 May 1991 at an arbitration meeting at IMSSA, NUMSA and Autoflug S.A. reached an agreement to resolve their dispute.

Settlement/Recognition

The parties agreed on monetary settlement concerning the case of Stephen Nhlapo (dismissed shopsteward chairperson) who is now employed as NUMSA organiser. The settlement is R4 000.

The company also agreed to recognise NUMSA representatives and shopstewards, and to allow the union access to company premises to hold meetings with shopstewards and general membership.

The parties also agreed that the present company disciplinary/grievance procedures will be negotiated and amended with NUMSA representatives.

In the light of the company management's previous refusal to both union and shopstewards of the above rights, we see this agreement as a step forward for the interests of both parties to start building a good and sound industrial relationship.

Viva NUMSA

Abissai Nkoe

There is a stainless steel plant in SA

Dear Sir

I have read with interest your article titled "Towards transforming SA industry" in the March 1991 SA Labour Bulletin Vol 15 No 6. However, I wish to draw your attention to an incorrect fact stated in this article.

This refers to the section on page 22 entitled "Manu-

facturing industry and the metal sector" where you claim that currently stainless steel is not manufactured in SA. This is not correct as at present Middelburg Steel & Alloys have a stainless steel plant producing approximately 110 000 tons per annum of stainless steel in plates, sheet and coils. Further, this company employs a large number of people, of which many are members of NUMSA. So where did you get the incorrect information from?

This incorrect information on something which is well known throws question on other facts in your article. Yours faithfully

P R Hatty
Barlow Rand

I thank Barlow Rand for pointing out my mistake, and apologise to our readers. I do however believe that my broad point still stands: the stainless steel produced by Middelburg Steel is a drop in the ocean of what could be produced. 75% of the world's chromium reserves are in SA. SA currently produces 40% of the world's ferrochrome, but only 1% of its stainless steel! Conversion of only 50% of SA ferrochrome into stainless steel in 1988 would have earned an additional R7 billion - and have opened up "a large stainless steel products sector", as I argued in my article.

Karl von Holdt
Editor, SA Labour Bulletin

Neocosmos is not convincing

Dear Editor

Neocosmos' response to the articles of WOSA (ie. Habib and Andrews) Jordan and Von Holdt in the SA Labour Bulletin (Vol.15 No.7) makes quite important points. However, his mode of thinking and his polemical style are hardly convincing.

Such polemical style not only stifles debate but also creates a moral atmosphere which is conducive to dogmatic, scholastic and doctrinaire attitudes. These attitudes make a creative approach to the problems of present-day socialism more difficult. We really have to avoid substituting name calling and jargon for healthy debate, whether with party or non-party activists.

Tolerance and respect for the other person's point of view does not mean abandoning one's own position. A sense of one's own dignity, respect for the feelings of others, and an ability to understand problems and people are a genuine adherence to principles that are inseparable from an elevated moral sense. Socialism can be saved only through the cut and thrust of constructive debate and not through labelling ways of thinking. If fruitful discussions are to become an active ingredient of progress, it has to be realised that neither in formulating nor in answering new questions does anyone hold a monopoly on the truth.

Theoretical weaknesses in classical Marxism

There is no doubt that there are some weaknesses in classical Marxism. None of the greatest figures in classical Marxism, with the partial exception of Gramsci, had tried to set out systematically the substance and specificity of Marxist political theory. Some of the most basic texts of the politics of Marxism are mostly unsystematic and fragmentary, for example: Marx's 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' and the 'Civil War in France', or Lenin's 'What is to be done?' and 'The State and Revolution'. Given their total engagement in political studies and the vital importance they all attached to theory, this is surprising and cannot be taken as accidental. This has in fact much to do with the state of Marxist theory today.

I am not, in the very least, trying to deprecate the works of these great thinkers and founders of socialism, but what I am saying is that, as regards theories of the State, politics and democracy, they did not finally complete these and set them down in formulations which, though perhaps subject to amplification, are not subject to questioning.

Neocosmos dismisses Von Holdt's contribution outright as being unsubstantiated. He does this on the basis of the presumed fact that Von Holdt did not read all forty-five volumes of Lenin's works, save the two most important works. How ludicrous and myopic this sort of an argument is!

Rather than reading the forty-five volumes of Lenin's works I would suggest that Neocosmos should thoroughly and critically study the two works Von Holdt has studied and see whether he will not come to a different conclusion than his present one.

Belittlement of theoretical work

Neocosmos accuses WOSA, Jordan and Von Holdt of belittling theoretical work. He boldly makes this charge yet he does not bother to demonstrate to his keen readers, in any convincing manner, how these intellectuals actually belittle theoretical work. I would have expected Neocosmos to have quoted some passages from each of these comrades' articles and show us in a systematic and convincing manner that they are guilty as charged. In the absence of such proof I find it convenient to dismiss his charge as unfair, unfortunate and misleading. In fact one would rather say Neocosmos himself undermines theoretical work by his style of argument.

This should not be taken as an indication that I agree with all that has been said by these three comrades in their articles which evoked such vicious attack from Neocosmos. To be sure, there are many points which I disagree with in WOSA's and Jordan's contribution - Cde Von Holdt is exceptional, I always find most of his articles to be of extreme theoretical importance. But I cannot on

the basis of my disagreement with them, then brand them Trotskyists and opportunists who belittle theoretical work. On the contrary, I find their articles informative, thought-provoking, and a contribution to Marxist theory.

It should be clear to every Marxist that any weakening of revolutionary theory, with the enormous intellectual capital it represents for humankind, has dire consequences and leads to stagnation not only in theory but also in the practice of the building of a new socialist society. The prime theoretical task of Marxist intellectuals today, one might say, is to help modern socialism to know itself. And of course this will not come about if intellectuals continue to go about in fear of touching on problems that were not covered in the classics of Marxism-Leninism, and venture no further than providing an uncritical commentary on those decisions.

Progression towards a new society is primarily the improvement of social relations, of course, on an appropriate material and spiritual basis. The task of theory is to observe and reflect not only the depth of these processes, but also the highly complex dialectics of the relationship between consciousness and practice and the general principles underlying the development of consciousness itself, both scientific and everyday consciousness.

Popo Maja
ex-Robben Island prisoner
and MK combatant, Soweto