Relevance of Lenin on Elections in present

Presentation by Cde Jeremy Cronin

Jack Simons Party School

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What can we learn from Lenin? (and from 175 yrs of Marxist theory AND practice?)

- It can't be a cut-and-paste job regardless of context/conjuncture
- Lenin insisted on a "concrete analysis of the concrete conjuncture"
- Requires – correct analysis of the complex, dialectical interaction of tendencies at
  - The global scale
  - Reciprocal interaction on the the objective national reality
  - And the dialectical impact of these upon subjective realities (class consciousness, capacities/weaknesses at the party level, etc, etc)
- Learning from Lenin (or Marx, Engels, Gramsci, Luxemburg, Mao, Fidel, Ruth First, Govan Mbeki, Slovo or cde Mzala) – we must understand the context in which a particular intervention was made, a particular line of march was advised, and the test of practice

June 2024 elections

- 1994 – 12,2million
- 1999 – 10,6 million
- 2004 – 10,9 million
- 2009 – 11,7 million
- 2014 – 11,4 million
- 2019 – 10,0 million
- 2024 – 6,5 million.

Note post-Polokwane 0,8 m jump in 2009 and massive drop (3,5m)of voters in 2024

Only 58% of registered voters voted. 14 m potential voters are not even registered

40% of potential voters didn't bother to vote in 2024

What's happened to a central call of our NL struggle – ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE!

Who voted…and who didn't??

Whites – 71%

Indians – 61%

Clds - 58%

Afns - 55%

- Voter disinterest most marked amongst most marginalised

BUT – African turnout in KZN = 60% vs. 51% in EC, Limpopo & NW

- Ethno-nationalist populism had ability to mobilise (MKP and PA)
- **A crisis of Working Class representation**

Why growing popular disillusion with electoral politics?

- General agreement = worsening crises of unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime after 30 years since democratic breakthrough.
- But why these crises? Dominant explanation in media = ANC corruption and mismanagement. “9 wasted years” narrative
- Some truth in this…BUT
- The key driving force behind these crises = entrenched and deepening, harsher neo-liberal austerity.
- Even chronic corruption directly linked to adoption of the neo-liberal New Public Management transforming of the state from a “doing” state into a “procuring state”
- **Might be more accurate to speak of 30 (largely) wasted years**

A GNU with its fulcrum around ANC/DA

- A GNU substantially an ANC/DA coalition
- Partially muted by presence of IFP, PA, PAC, Good, UDM etc – but who all variously represent class strata that will join centre-right in the ANC to defend a narrow version of BEE
- Crisis of Working Class representation further compounded by MKP and EFF whose principal critique of DA (and FF+) is that they are “WHITE parties” (which they largely are) – but this tends to mask what is most important - the dominant ANC centre-right and DA share – i.e. the critical area of economic policy

Durability of GNU? Future of the ANC?

- The entrenchment of neoliberal austerity – will exacerbate the crises of unemployment, poverty, inequality, failing municipalities, etc
- Unless there is a major course correction the electoral prospects for the ANC in 2026 and 2029 are grim
- This political crisis in SA is not exceptional – see rise of right-wing populism in France, Italy, Netherlands, Argentina, India, etc and the more general crisis of “liberal” democracy (UK, US)
- Faced with this reality in SA – What should be the SACP’s strategy and tactics?

The question of the state and state power and elections - What can we learn from Lenin?

- In this SA’n conjuncture what can we learn from Lenin, in particular, and more generally from 170 years of Marxist-Leninist theory AND practice??
- What perspectives has Lenin, and more generally, Marxism-Leninism provided on electoral politics on a parliamentary terrain?

Marx and the Chartists
Working Class struggle for the vote

- Chartists = English working class movement launched with People's Charter 1838,
- Main demand – full male franchise, abolition of property qualification, elected reps to be paid a salary
- In late-1840s Marx and Engels engaged with the Chartists, recognised value of franchise demand…but especially interested in:
- Mass rallies, million signature campaigns, and some militant action (e.g. food riots) – i.e. development of a mass and mobilised working class
- In the Communist Manifesto (1848) Mx & Engels call on communists in England to support and work with the Chartist movement
- Facing heavy repression and co-option of its leaders the Movement petered out in the 1850s

1871 – the Paris Commune
Direct/Participatory Self-Governance

- With Prussian army advancing on Paris, French government and bourgeoisie abandoned the French capital
- Popular masses in Paris rose up, abolished the police and army, all who could carried arms and enrolled in the National Guard
- Factories of bourgeoisie who had fled were seized and run by workers themselves, all rent for housing, and all night-shifts work was abolished
- Government of Commune formed by elected reps of the various wards of the city, elected directly by citizens and recallable from office at any time. All elected reps and functionaries received the same wage as an ordinary worker.
- Unlike parliamentary body the Commune was both legislature and executive.
- Lasted only 72 days and crushed in blood (15,000 to 20,000 killed 43,000 taken prisoner) as Prussians collaborated with French reaction.

Marx and Engels on the Paris Commune

- The Paris Commune made a huge impact on Marx (see “The Civil War in France” 1871) and via Marx upon Lenin (see “The State and Revolution”- August 1917)
- For Marx here in practice (despite its short life-span and defeat) was the embryonic invention of a workers’ state as distinct from bourgeois liberal parliamentarianism
- Marx: “Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people…”
- Engels: “Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?”
- To be sure, mistakes were made by the Communards – failed to seize the gold in the National Treasury, failed to arrest fleeing bourgeois…i.e. sometimes not acting with sufficient class force
- This grounded development of concept of “dictatorship of the proletariat” as the necessary flip-side of deep participatory working class democracy.

Parliamentary democracy
So-called bourgeois/liberal democracy

- Never a gift of the bourgeoisie
- 1-person 1-vote has always had to be fought for by popular masses
- In UK universal suffrage only won in 1928
- In US only in 1965
- And never irreversible – capitalists quite prepared to abolish parliamentary democracy if challenged by popular masses (e.g. Italy, Germany, Chile, etc etc)

A parliamentary road to state power & socialism?

- In last quarter of 1800s growing industrialisation and proletarianization in Europe saw emergence of mass workers' parties
- They formed the core of what was known as the 2nd International, which Marxism was the dominant ideology
- In Germany in particular the socialist party (SPD) emerged as a massive party with hundreds of thousands of members and millions of voters
- Belief that prospects winning a parliamentary majority and advancing to socialism peacefully – Bernstein, Kautsky,"reformism" (opposed in Germany by Rosa Luxemburg)

The split in the international socialist movement

- With outbreak of 1st World War (1914), war of competing imperialists (German, British, Italian, French, Russian) – majority of German and French socialists, British Labour party MPs voted with their national bourgeoisies
- Lenin, Luxemburg and others saw this as a betrayal of working class internationalism
- A massive split occurred in the ranks of the 2nd international with left breakaways, including Lenin's Bolshevik party
- Origin of the social democracy/communist split and formation of a 3rd Communist International
- This is the origin of the CPSA/SACP, with the International Socialist League in SA, breaking away from the SA Labour Party

Lenin on the illusions of parliamentarianism

- Under conditions of one-person one-vote the illusion is that “everyone is equal” - abstracts out all that surrounds an election in a capitalist country – power of media, funding of political parties, etc etc
- Just like in the “equality” of the market-place.
- “revisionism did really try to revise the foundation of Marxism, namely the doctrine of class struggle. Political freedom, democracy and universal suffrage remove the ground for the class struggle – we were told [by the revisionists]… since the ‘will of the majority’ prevails in a democracy…. [supposedly the state is no longer a site of class struggle] (Lenin)

Lenin, the Paris Commune, and the Soviets 1917

- In August 1917 (eve of the October Revolution) L. wrote “The State and Revolution) drawing centrally on Mx’s study of the Paris Commune.
- Reactionary Russia had become embroiled in the 1914-1918 inter-imperialist 1st World War. Millions of peasants and workers were conscripted (and armed) to fight in this war among imperialist robbers.
- Russian soldiers mutinied in growing numbers and returned home, setting up local Soviets of workers and peasants.

All power to the Soviets!

- In Feb 1917 Tsarist autocracy was overthrown and replaced by a parliament (Duma) and a Constituent Assembly in which the Bolsheviks were present, along with the leading bourgeois party (the Kadets), and other left-leaning parties (Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, etc).
- The majority favoured continuing the war –
- Only Bolsheviks clearly recognised the crisis and desperate impatience of the masses, and advanced the slogan Bread, Peace and Land.
- In an armed insurrection and with the slogan “All Power to the Soviets”, Bolsheviks with the Soviets led an insurrection that abolished the Duma/Parliament and made the October Revolution.

Deepening popular democratic participation AND its necessary counterpart – suppression of the exploiters

- Lenin saw in these early Soviets a Russian version of the Paris Commune – replacing liberal bourgeois parliamentary democracy with direct, self-government of local popular and working class collectives.
- This involved the simultaneous deepening of popular democratic involvement and necessarily the repression of the bourgeoisie
- "Simultaneously with an immense expansion of democracy, which for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the money-bags, the dictatorship of the proletariat imposes a series of restrictions on the freedom of the oppressors, the exploiters, the capitalists. We must suppress them in order to free humanity from slavery…"

Not a day’s peace for the Svt Union

- But new socialist state not a single day’s peace – civil war, invasion of various imperialist powers
- Survived but at a huge cost – proletarian vanguard within Bolshevik/communist party decimated, and vibrant democracy of early soviets lost.
- Suppression of bourgeoisie turned into suppression of left parties, and factions within the Bolsheviks and a forced march into rapid industrialisation
- Without these measures Nazi Germany would probably have won World War 2 and we would all be living in a very different world

Insurrection or Parliamentary Participation?

- With Bolshevik insurrectionary victory in 1917 & sell-out of socialist parties in liberal democracies – did this mean parliamentary participation = a reformist sell-out?
- Lenin (1919 – “Left-wing communism - an Infantile Disorder”), ultra-leftists called for “boycott of parliaments” under any circumstances.
- Lenin: Russian conditions very different from those in France, or Belgium

Antonio Gramsci “Prison Notebookss

- “War of Manoeuvre” (possible in tottering Tsarist Russia), but “War of Position” – trench by trench struggle in more advanced capitalist countries required
- An immediate, direct assault on the commanding heights of the bourgeois state not feasible
- Instead trench warfare for class/popular hegemony in communities, factories, in churches and schools, on the land, on the cultural front, among the armed forces, and (if possible) in parliaments
- The state is a site of struggle,
- Without broad hegemonic struggle, parliamentary electoralism = a very challenging terrain for left parties in a capitalist society

Contrasting understandings of the April 1994 democratic breakthrough in SA





30 squandered years

- 1994 democratic breakthrough was NOT a gift of the SA'n bourgeoisie. A victory of popular and wk class struggle over many decades.
- But not total victory. A bridge-head in which ANC's large electoral majority could (and should) have been used to deepen democracy and to discipline capitalists
- Instead with GEAR reversed even the discipline enforced on monopoly capital by apartheid regime – exchange controls, corporate tax, prescribed assets
- AND demobilisation of popular and working class forces

Lessons
Class struggle didn't end in 1994

Class approach following 1994 democratic breakthrough should have been – to use electoral majority

To discipline capital

- Exchange controls
- Prescribed assets
- Reserve Bank mandate – to include employment

To invest in strategic, key state-owned entities Eskom, Railways, Telkom, SAPO

- As public utilities and not as SOEs

Lessons 2
Deepen (not hollow out) democracy:

Sustain popular and working class agency

- 1980s – early1990s Organs of Popular Power (civics, grass-roots women's and youth structures, SDUs, street committees), shop stewards locals, factory committees
- All of these submerged into the state, or into top down national structures (ANCWL, ANCYL, SANCO)
- ANC itself increasingly narrowed into an electoral formation (both parliamentary and internally – competing electoral lists) – lost its ability to lead non-election campaigns e.g. around U-BIG, or financial sector campaign, or even Palestine –
- and now diminishing ability to campaign electorally

Way forward for SACP

Has the SACP also been affected?

- Tendency to collapse the question of state power into a narrow question of the SACP and elections
- Party's ability play effective role in popular campaign – compare 2000 Financial Sector Campaign vs. SACP's role in UBIG campaign

Yet Party has major responsibility in present

- ANC unable to provide a clear anti-neoliberal perspective

What does this mean?

- Importance of popular campaigning LPF (s) – around UBIG, Public Employment
- But also contesting within ANC – reconfiguring ANC