JACK SIMONS
PARTY SCHOOL

Trade unionism and the socialist struggle today







Presenters:

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Context

- The two largest trade union federations in South Africa - COSATU and SAFTU - define socialism as their goal.

- A number of unions, both in COSATU and SAFTU, claim to be Marxist- Leninist organisations or inspired by Marxism-Leninism.

- A significant number of affiliates described themselves as **RED** unions.

How do radical characterisations square up with the state of the labour movement?

- With a large cadre that sits as trustees on boards of retirement funds, why is it that labor continuously becries lack of investment in infrastructure and other productive sectors of the economy?

- With levels of unionisation in the public service above 70%, what are RED unions doing about pockets of failure in state organs and other arms of the public service?

- With labour reps on boards of SoEs, where were Marxist-Leninist trade unions when stock thieves raided the kraal and captured parts of the state?

Further questions

- With the revelations in the Madlanga Commission, where was POPCRU and SAPU, even SAMWU in Ekurhuleni Metro Municipality, when the shenanigans took place?

- Why do we still have a male-dominated labour movement, when the slogan “The future is feminist” is repeatedly raised?

- With all the resources, why are Red or Marxist-Leninist unions unable to effectively organise unorganised sectors?

Argument

- Trade unions have a crucial role to play in the struggle for socialism.

"The trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon. It becomes a determinate institution, that is, it assumes a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it".

- Antonio Gramsci's essay titled *"Unions and Councils"* (Part II), originally published in the socialist newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo* in 1919.

- There is a mismatch between characterisations and actions.

Why the mismatch?

- The decline in prefigurative politics captured in the slogan: *Socialism is the future! Build it now*.
- The rise in politics of maximalism (*emphasis on a maximum programme*)
- The vice-grip of Lenin's *What is to be done* and the limitations thesis

Marxism and trade unions

OPTIMISTIC SCHOOL	PESSIMISTIC SCHOOL
Trade unions are schools of war Unions have a positive and crucial role in the struggle for socialism Unions can play an important role in overtly anti-capitalist struggle	Although important as defensive organisations, trade unions are limited in the struggle for socialism A vanguard political party should lead the struggle for socialism It is syndicalism to prescribe an explicit role to unions

Extracts from Lenin's *What is to be done*

- We have said that *there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.

- We have said that *there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without.

- Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.

The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution

- Joe Slovo (1988)

The very fact that the workers' economic struggle cannot be separated from the struggle against national domination has helped to blur the border-line between trade unionism and the political leadership of the working class as a whole. ***It is, however, vital to maintain the distinction between trade union politics and overall revolutionary leadership. A trade union cannot carry out this dual role; if it attempted to do so it would have to change its basic character and risk committing suicide as a mass legal force. In addition, the very nature and purpose of trade unionism disqualifies it from carrying out the tasks of a revolutionary vanguard.***

The need for a grounded theory of the role of unions in the struggle for socialism

- A theory that combines both limitations and potential.
- A theory that appreciate the duality of trade unions.
- A theory that recognise both defensive and anti-capitalist roles of trade union organisations.
- A theory that counterweights to limitations.