

Insurrection in South Africa?

GRAEME BLOCH challenges the romantic notions of insurrection current amongst sections of the left, and argues that the objective conditions demand a long-term 'war of position' strategy, which creatively exploits the terrain of negotiations

A number of key issues of the day hinge around the question of insurrection. These include an approach to negotiations; the issue of defence committees and their more general strategic significance; the nature and type of mass mobilisation, its demands and targets.

There can be no revolution without revolutionary theory. But insurrection is not an abstract or a general concept: it points to a specific moment, a particular combination of forces, and rapid tactical and strategic shifts. Insurrection is a concrete problem requiring concrete strategies and preparation. It occurs at the centre of a complex range of forces, international, psychological, political, economic and cultural.

At one level, insurrection is a description. It refers to an armed seizure of power; the identification, neutralisation or control of key strategic points; the immobilising of government functions and the substitution of an alternative popular authority.

At another level, the term insurrection points to a qualitative shift in social relations, a decisive movement of mass-based direct action to effect a shift in class powers, a short and intense period of rupture and break in which the basis of a new social order is installed.

In the period of the mass, all-round uprising, all restrictions and conventions are rejected, subordinated to the full-frontal assault on the citadels of power, often with the use of force to subdue the ruling classes' own dependence on violence as the last resort of class rule.

There is a romantic appeal about insur-

rection to any revolutionary. The problems of social domination and exploitation are confronted vigorously and directly; they are resolved instantly, or transformed at the least by the first and decisive moment of an uninterrupted process. The key institutions of domination are identified and occupied, the centre of power crumbles to the will and conscious intervention of the subordinate classes.

This idea of the key moment, of a real decisive clean and deep surgical break, with the removal of all the dross of the past as the scales fall from the people's eyes, has clear attractions. History moves with seven league boots and complex problems are subsumed to the revolutionary moment.

Yet we need to subject this strand of thinking to rigorous examination. In the face of manifest problems in building and sustaining socialism - not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Third World, from Nicaragua to Vietnam to Mozambique - it is correct to question assumptions and presuppositions about the process of fundamental social transformation.

How are social relations to be transformed at all levels: political, economic, social, personal? How are racism and economic exploitation to be eliminated, such that there is not a mere transfer of power to a new exploiting class? How are institutions, social practices and ideological formations to be re-formed or constituted?

Classical marxist origins

The idea of insurrection is of classically marxist origin (though not exclusively so). It rests on a tradition of thinking about the state and power that goes back



to Marx's idealised formulations about the Paris Commune.

In Lenin, the theory of insurrection was given practical effect and real strategic meaning. The vehicle for mass intervention was identified in the tight vanguard of revolutionaries that make up the Communist Party, with a clear plan, a political programme, and a base in the soviets and popular assemblies that challenged and defied both tsarist and capitalist rule.

Lenin's theoretical formulations found expression in 'The State and Revolution'. His position is concentrated in the slogan of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', whose simplifications and problems have been the source of a permanent blind-



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spot in marxist thought.

Identifying power by a centralised and concentrated political moment, Lenin reduces the problems of constructing socialism to technical exigencies as the state withers away. A range of political questions disappear. Class contradiction is identified with naked force and a relationship of violent suppression.

Joe Slovo (1990) has helped open a debate in South African left circles about the origins of stalinism. He has been rightly criticised for his focus on the personal aspects of the abuse of socialist power, rather than a structural analysis of the forces that sustained the anti-democratic tone of stalinist rule (see eg Habib & Andrews).

Yet the same critics have been reluctant to discover some of the origins of the problem in the limited conceptions of power and politics generated by Lenin, and the strategic errors of the leninist approach.

Treating insurrection like a picnic

Revolution may not be a dinner-party, but to treat the insurrection like a picnic is to seriously underplay the complexities of *establishing and maintaining the momentum to socialism.*

In South Africa, this viewpoint is given practical expression in the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa): '...the state is a product of irreconcilable class conflict within the social structure

which it seeks to regulate on behalf of the ruling class. The state is the organised political expression, the instrument, of the decisive class in the economy.' (Habib & Andrews, p92)

'Socialism would only be realised through the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the system it represents and defends. This can only occur through the mass actions of the working class which would eventually culminate in an insurrection. The socialist state can and will only be built on the ashes of its bourgeois predecessor.' (Habib & Andrews, p93)

Similar assumptions appear to be the basis of formulations in the propaganda of the Marxist Workers Tendency. The strategic perspective of armed workers



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and youth, at the barricades and in direct confrontation with the security forces, opening up the class war against Buthelezi and Inkatha, transforming (much-needed) defence committees into the basis of attacking formations: these calls ring with appeal to 1917 and the popular authority of the Soviets. They beg for the seizure of the town hall, parliament and printing presses as the bourgeoisie is suppressed and disappears.

This is the romantic 'berets and barricades' conception of the revolution. There is an absence of a clear strategy that goes beyond vague calls and general formulations.

Similar strains, perhaps even less clearly formulated, are to be found in positions adopted by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), with an anti-colonialist twist. Here too, the oppressor disappears or is driven into the sea. Violence becomes a Fanonist, cleansing act that purifies the revolutionary scene, in the allusive phrase 'One Settler, One Bullet!'. Again, the insurrection is unstrategised, and lacks specificity.

Surprisingly, similar approaches have been central in the SACP programme, *The Path to Power*. Here it is argued that 'The partial uprisings which have become a feature of our mass struggles must also be seen as a school for the accumulation of insurrectionary experience.'

And further: 'The crisis facing our ruling class will be aggravated still further by a combination of mass upsurge, in which working class action at the point of production will play a key role, mass

defiance, escalating revolutionary combat activity, intensified international pressure, a situation of ungovernability, a deteriorating economy and growing demoralisation, division, vacillation and confusion within the power bloc...Seizure of power will be a product of escalating and progressive merging of mass political and military struggle with the likelihood of culminating in an insurrection.'

Multi-layered perspective

Processes of social change are simplified and strategies remain general. Against this, one needs to develop a more clearly-formulated critique, as well as a new conception that is dynamic, all-round and multi-layered.

(i) In the first place, power is not centralised in the citadel. It is diffused in a range of practices, institutions and ideologies throughout society. While the political may represent the decisive concentration, the moment that must be prioritised, it is clear that revolutionary bases need to be built at all levels: ideological, spiritual, physical, economic.

Eliminating the racial parliament will not ensure that sexist ideas no longer remain; a socialist economic policy will not transform undemocratic educational practices in the classroom. The challenge to undemocratic rule must of necessity be diffuse, and will thus also be uneven.

(ii) Contradictions cannot be simply reduced to class contradictions, and relations to those of suppression and force. Marxism, to its discredit, has failed to produce adequate theorisations of nation-

alism, ethnicity, religion, gender, culture. Rather than a conception of a two-class stand-off, we need to see ideology as the cement that unifies a counter-hegemonic bloc. Social movements, often organised around non-class contradictions, enrich a confident and independent civil society.

(iii) Change itself needs to be theorised as a complex combination of social processes. These include objective and subjective factors, the ability to read the developing moment in its constituent elements as well as in its combination.

(iv) Revolution includes periods of slow build-up (in which trenches, ramparts and defenses are built or occupied) as well as periods of decisive action, direct confrontation and rapid all-round mobilisation.

(v) A strategic question has been sharply posed by the problems of modern revolutions. Even if power is seized, how is it to be kept? No society can be perpetually at war. No revolutionary can glibly talk war without seriously considering its social effects, on future generations, on the culture of tolerance and democracy, on the physical ability to construct and reconstruct.

How is mobilisation to be politically maintained? How is support for the goals of the revolution to be sustained amongst the democratic majority, if not through the social formation as a whole? These are not light questions.

(vi) Political will is not enough to transform either the relations or the infrastructure of the new society. In the Soviet Union, the best revolutionary cadres were removed from mobilisation to staff the administration of government. Bureaucracy and inefficiency reflected real shortages of skill and the means to run the society at a practical level.

To manage a modern economy and other social institutions, to deliver the goods that genuinely transform the quality of life of those who have sustained the revolution, is more than just a matter of wishful thinking.

Antonio Gramsci

These perspectives have been developed from the theoretical work of Antonio Gramsci. He argued that the 'internal relations of a country must be understood and conceived in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate them and direct them' (Simon, p34).

To create and sustain a revolution, it was necessary for a fundamental class to establish 'hegemony', or 'intellectual and moral leadership':

'A social group can, indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power (this is indeed one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to "lead" as well.' (in Simon, p22).

The concept of hegemony is embedded in a field of concepts that will not be elaborated here. However, hegemony is not conceived in terms of a simple construction of alliances, but includes the concept of 'national-popular':

'A class cannot achieve national leadership and become hegemonic, if it confines itself only to class interests; it must take into account the popular and democratic demands and struggles of the people which do not have a purely class character, that is, which do not rise directly out of the relations of production.' (Simon, p23)

The building of hegemony involves a crucial ideological aspect: 'The illusion that characterises the ultra-left is that the working class will eventually come to adopt Marxism in its pure form as its ideology. Instead, there has to be a more complex synthesis of class objectives with themes that have arisen out of the original and unique history of each country.' (Simon, p61)

From here, Gramsci develops the strategic conception of the 'war of position':

'This war of position does not exclude the possibility of very sharp struggles, even violent ones, against the coercive organs of the state. What it means is that the decisive struggle for state power can only be won on the basis of a decisive shift in the balance of forces in civil society...the shift in the balance of forces and the transformation of the state are likely to take place in stages, so that the achievement of each stage creates the conditions for further advances.' (Simon, p75)

Not reformist

Gramsci's war of position is neither an argument for reformism, nor for a watered down form of social democracy. The correct strategy, tactics and organisation depend on a concrete analysis of the given situation and of the overall balance of forces.

Indeed, 'insurrectionary tactics' emphasize the learning experience and empowering activity that come from unified and direct popular actions. The

emphasis on popular, grassroots struggles around a range of social issues is a crucial perspective to challenge all relations of domination. The active revolutionary process from below asserts how transformation is a day-to-day series of challenges, not one single moment.

Such a creative attempt to develop Gramscian concepts in the South African situation has been attempted by Karl von Holdt (1990).

There are a number of strategic considerations that appear to weigh heavily in favour of an insurrectionary approach. Yet the concrete situation cries out against a full-blown insurrectionary perspective.

The terrain of negotiations

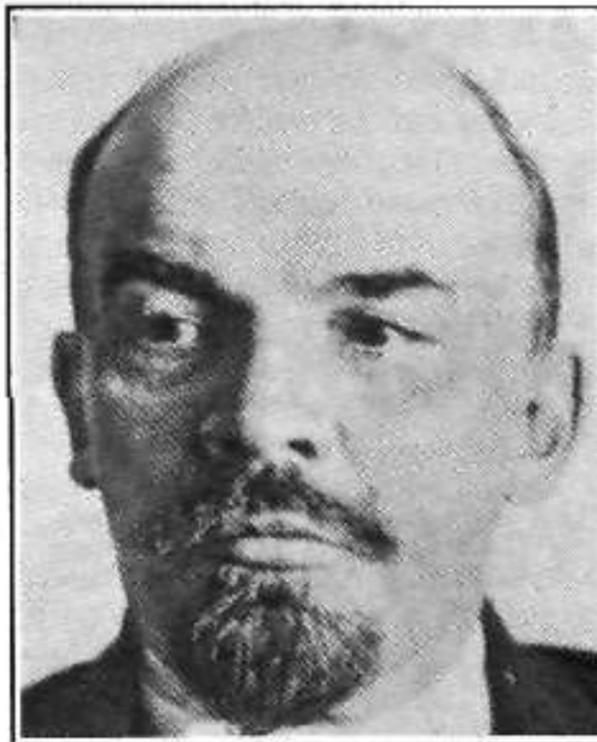
While the SACP programme sees no contradiction between this perspective and the 'negotiated transfer of power', it is clear that current political developments seriously question the above formulations. The emergence of the terrain of negotiations has shifted the possibilities for an insurrectionary approach.

Negotiations requires a new form of politics. These include the politics of pressure, of opening up space, of enhancing organisational capacity while occupying bases and terrains, and also of compromises.

Negotiations themselves can occur in a situation of weakness. The aims of the state are precisely that; in particular, to demobilise and remove the scope of mass popular actions from the field of struggle.

There is the ever-present danger of the current processes resulting in what

Lenin: His simplifications have been the source of a permanent blind spot in Marxist thought.



Gramsci called 'passive revolution'. This is the 'revolution from above' that leaves fundamental social relations intact. It demobilises the ongoing capacity of the masses to identify and challenge their domination.

Negotiations without mass politics and pressure are not an alternative to insurrection, but a fundamental shift in goals and objectives.

War of position

I have challenged the romantic notions of insurrection, pointing to theoretical and practical limitations. Real gains are possible from the current situation, and from an attempt to properly theorise and develop the terrain of negotiations. Even if it were possible to seize power in an insurrectionary moment, a range of critical problems, relating to sustaining and delivering the promises of the revolution, remain.

Against this, the paper has argued for the building of alliances and political support in a war of position. In the current conjuncture this includes the overwhelming necessity of participating in the processes of negotiation. This means putting aside long-held formulations about insurrection, that demobilise and prevent the emergence of concepts adequate to the current tasks.

The struggle is not a short-term one, that can simply wish away complex processes of social change that may take generations to accomplish. Nor can people be disciplined into line, but must be mobilised, convinced and won over. The goals and objectives in one's head cannot be confused with what exists on the ground.

Nonetheless, a reality of the moment is mass politics, and mobilisational politics. There is a need to enhance the institutions and structures that can sustain this.

While we may no longer look forward to the insurrection itself, there is no need to abandon 'insurrectionary tactics', and the militant, direct mass action that accompany it.

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