THE SUBTERRANEAN FIRE OF CLASS STRUGGLE

Professor Lucien van der Walt
Photo: Paul Greenway

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"Reports of the death of the broad working class are greatly exaggerated," says Lucien van der Walt with mild but discernible flourish. "Too many experts believed it anachronistic, passé. But if you look around internationally, and locally too, that's just not the case. It is bigger than ever; its rumblings shake the world. It has now overtaken the peasantry as the biggest class, as the majority of humanity."

Van der Walt, a Professor in the Department of Sociology, has a wide range of academic interests including anarchism and syndicalism, labour and left-wing history and politics, and working-class responses to neo-liberal economics. While he's happy to admit that some of the grand political narratives like Marxism-Leninism and Third World nationalism have foundered, he nonetheless believes that there's ample evidence to suggest that the struggles of labour and the Left are by no means done and dusted.

And this applies internationally as well as closer to home. Whether these are neighbourhood blockades by the unemployed in Argentina demanding tools to work, or whether it's the anarchist- and Marxist-influenced Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) creating a revolutionary zone in Kurdish Syria, strikes in China, or ongoing battles in South Africa, working class-struggle is alive and kicking. Sometimes you have to know where to look; you need to be prepared to scratch the surface, and look beyond neglect, dissembling, and even propaganda.

"The page has by no means turned on working-class organisations," says van der Walt. "If you look at the struggles of the unemployed, the rural poor, at neighbourhood organisations, at unions, the working class remains of one type or another. There's undeniable vitality there. The subterranean fire of class struggle always smoulders, sometimes flaring red and black."

Much of van der Walt's work in 2014 has been on the global history of anarchism and syndicalism across the world, an act he characterises as one of reclamation. This is the story of anarchism as a movement globally, whether this be in Latin America and the Caribbean, or Asia, or part of large swathes of Europe, and elsewhere, anarchism has a rich, significant history, a product of class struggles.

Van der Walt stresses any conversation about intellectual and political history has to also be a conversation about the Left traditions of the working class, including Marxism, anarchism and syndicalism. In his work, van der Walt has ventured into the anarchist histories of countries as diverse as Poland and Korea, but notes that telling a global history has

practical and analytical difficulties. “I think access to information isn’t the issue, so much as pulling it together in a balanced and coherent narrative,” he says.

Whether he’s investigating the history of anarchism or simply commenting on the refusal of left-wing movements to wither and die, van der Walt understands that history is an enigmatic and challenging space, in that what was should not be mixed up with what had to be. For every turning, there were different roads: human choices shaped where we are today, and we forget how very different things were, and *could* have been. “History always points to paths not taken,” he says with subtlety. “And it’s significant to remember that what happened wasn’t always what had to happen. We think today as if the ANC was always the major resistance force, the inevitable victor. But for much of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, the ANC was a comparatively minor player; in the 1940s the Communist Party was far, far bigger. People forget that the ANC didn’t have a single trade union affiliate in the 1940s, while the Communist Party led unions of hundreds of thousands, and dozens of townships.”

While van der Walt notes the ongoing emergence of pockets of dissent and radicalism, of autonomous organisations and the flexing of left-wing muscle worldwide, he’s less sanguine about the role taken by the more orthodox unions. Generally he believes sections within unions have been compromised by alliances with the state and political parties, leading to a softening of their stance. This applies generally, whether we are talking at home or abroad. “Many union leaders have been co-opted, and this within the context of dire economic conditions. The Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) may be keeping its numbers stable, but it’s stagnated, mired in the party system, hardly grown in 15 years. Of course, an entire union can’t be co-opted, because capitalism and the state cannot buy off the class they exploit. But leaders can be captured easily.”

Fragmentation has become another major issue for unions. As examples locally, he cites the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union’s (Amcu) breakaway from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and the National Union of Metalworkers’ (Numsa) split from Cosatu. The latter he dubs “very important” because in Numsa’s move away from Cosatu and rejection of the ANC, there are signs of a possible re-alignment, “It could be a game-changer if a big national union like Numsa provided support for the sporadic but potent township revolts, often very localised, or hooked up with mass strikes on the farms in the Western Cape, or with the rural unemployed - and helped build a real, effective working class united front,” he says. “But Numsa is divided internally - they really can’t agree on what to do or how to do it, and the moment can end sooner than people think. If ordinary people do not seize it, politicians will hijack it.”

This, then, is the rub in the contemporary South African landscape: while there are many outbursts of dissatisfaction and rage, there’s no umbrella body or mass front, or even widespread cohesion, whether union-driven or not. This is what distinguishes the current scenario from, say, what was happening in the 1980s, where the rise of powerful and radical formations like the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) gave coherence to the struggle against apartheid (and in some cases the struggle against capital).

This moment requires a hard-nosed analysis of the state. In South Africa’s semi-industrial capitalist economy, van der Walt argues, the state has become a major vehicle in class formation. This is largely because that while opportunities nominally exist in the private sector for advancement and promotion, in actuality such pathways are few and far between. “It’s very difficult for an independent black industrialist class to get a foothold on the economy because white capital has been so centralised historically,” he says. “The state then becomes important to class formation through circuits of accumulation and patronage. The civil service suddenly is an arena for self- advancement, which means South Africa has two elites, pitted against the people: private capital and state managers.”

Given all of this - from the structural imbalances of the South African economy, to recession and outpourings of popular dissatisfaction - the current moment is difficult to assess. “It’s unpredictable and I steer clear or predictions anyway,” says van der Walt. “I really don’t know if we will have a Tunisia Moment or not, and if we did, where it would go. But I know the consciousness of the working class will be decisive.”

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