

# Understanding South Africa's incomplete liberation: An anarchist/syndicalist analysis

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*Input at Makhanda, South Africa, one-day workshop: "An Alternative for a World in Crisis: The Rojava Revolution, Kurdish Freedom Movement and Prospects for South Africa's Incomplete Liberation." The workshop was attended by 60 people, mostly from the Phakamani Siyephambili farmworkers' committee movement, the Unemployed Peoples Movement, the Sakhuluntu Cultural Group/Workers World Media and the East Cape Agricultural Research Project. It was organized by the International Labour Research and Information Group and the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit, and part of the ground-breaking national Rojava Speaking Tour by Ercan Ayboga and Rohash Shexo from Kurdistan, run by ILRIG.*

The 1994 transition to a democratic parliamentary state was a major advance for South Africans, including the black working class and poor. For the first time, there was a constitution with guaranteed rights, universal suffrage, and a formal commitment to equality. The openly racist practices of the old government were now illegal; instead of an authoritarian state, the country now had free, fair elections. The state welfare system was deracialized, schools and universities were desegregated, as were residential areas and state services, and the homeland or Bantustan system was formally abolished as efforts were made to create a single, unified people. These are not small achievements: 350 years of authoritarian state rule based on white supremacy had ended.

*At the same time, the transition failed to fundamentally eradicate inequality or exploitation in South Africa.* For most of the black working class and poor, the past (in the form of the apartheid legacy) and the present (in the form of an ongoing cheap black labor system) remain daily reality. This can be seen in terms of the perpetuation of the township system in the towns, with its wretched schools and living conditions, housing shortages, poverty, overcrowding, mass unemployment and crime; of white-dominated capitalist agriculture and massively unequal land ownership in much of the countryside; and of chiefly/royal rule and grim underdevelopment in the old homeland areas. A large social welfare system blunts the edges, but excludes the unemployed and pays pittance; the state services on which most people rely are run-down and inadequate.

**The simple reality is that the transition in South Africa retained the major structures that enabled the centralization of major social resources in the hands of a few: a small ruling class still dominates and exploits the majority of our people, the working class and poor. These structures are capitalism and the state.**

This was not an accident or a product of bad leaders, of an unholy compromise, or a "sell-out." The nationalist politicians who won control of the national liberation struggle in South Africa never intended to get rid of these structures. They wanted to capture them instead. These politicians played a progressive role in the fight against apartheid, but their political project was fundamentally incapable of creating a society that would provide complete liberation for the mass of the people. It was not inevitable that the nationalists would capture the struggle, but their victory ensured that the mass of the people only got an incomplete liberation – and that, in power, the nationalist politicians would become

part of an oppressive, exploitative ruling class.

## Deep Structure of Inequality

It is difficult to see how massive poverty, inequality and other social evils, which primarily affect black working class and poor people, can be removed without a massive expenditure of resources, in the trillions of Rands – and an accompanying reorganization of the economy to move resources into houses, rather than shopping malls, into decent jobs rather than a cheap labor system that entrenches poverty and entails mass unemployment, into reliable and renewable energy and water rather than crumbling infrastructure etc. At the same time, major changes would be needed to end a system based on cheap black labor, unequal development and mass unemployment.

But that is not what is happening. Wealth and power remain profoundly centralized in the hands of a few, and if anything, this has become worse. And this is not simply about race. The average white is far better-off than the average black, and the old white corporate and farming elite retain their wealth. Most black African households live in poverty, and remain a source of cheap labor. However, the black middle class and elite are part of the upper 10 percent of society – although many are vocal nationalists who flatly deny that blacks are divided by class. As far back as 1996, "the average household income in the richest tenth of black households was over two hundred and fifty times higher than the average income in the poorest tenth."<sup>1</sup> A black elite was part of the apartheid state (especially through the homeland system), and the black elite has grown massively post-apartheid. Figures like Cyril Ramaphosa – current president of South Africa, who rose from trade union leader to billionaire leader of the ruling African National Congress – are only the top of a huge iceberg.

*Differences in income are only part of the story of post-apartheid inequality.* We need to look at where income comes from, and how income inequalities reflect deeper structural inequalities in control over power and wealth. For example, recent work suggests that the top 10 percent of households in South Africa own 87 percent of aggregate wealth, the top 0.1 percent close to one-third and the top 0.01 percent (3,500 individuals) concentrate 15 percent of total household net worth.<sup>2</sup> It is not a coincidence that the highest-earning 10 percent in South Africa also receive more than 50 percent of all income in the country,<sup>2</sup> and that nearly half of this income actually goes to just the top 1 percent.<sup>4</sup>

But even this simplifies things too much. For example, the South African state president earns around R4 million a year. A registered nurse from South Africa, working in Saudi Arabia on contract, can earn up to R1 million a year,<sup>5</sup> and if two nurses on such contracts shared a household, they would get R2 million a year.

Yet the difference between the president and the nurses is vastly bigger than R2 million in income. The state president has power over hundreds of billions of Rand, over a million employees including the army and police, massive state corporations such as the gigantic electricity firm ESKOM and other state assets,<sup>6</sup> the harbors, around a quarter of all land, and a vast range of other

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resources.<sup>7</sup> While the president commands vast bureaucratic, military and productive assets, and hundreds of thousands of people, the nurses' personal "wealth" in the form of assets are likely to be those that do not provide power or wealth: a house, a car or two, and financial policies like pensions.

### Class Power and Wealth

So, it is important to look at where income comes from. A very high salary is typically tied to two things: first, a very powerful position in society that provides access to, and control of, major social resources; and, second, the ability to set the salary itself, such that people in these top positions do not negotiate with an employer for wages, but are in fact employers who can decide what they will pay themselves.

Let me be clear that this also means that wealth and power are not restricted to private capitalists. Obviously, the owner of a large private firm, such as a mining corporation, controls wealth-generating assets and workers, and earns a high income. But the same is also true of people with senior positions in the state, as these positions also grant control over wealth-generating assets and workers, and earn a high income.

You do not need to be a capitalist to wield state power. Wielding state power can make you at least as powerful as a major capitalist, and state power can lead directly to personal wealth accumulation. Only one out of the eleven South African heads of state (Ramaphosa) since the South African state was created in 1909 was a capitalist when he took office; and Ramaphosa's rise to riches was not due to business skills or family wealth, but was made possible by his political connections and profile. Economic wealth can generate political power, but political power can also generate economic wealth. So it is mistaken to argue – as do many Marxists – that real power is economic power, or that state power is simply a tool for the economically powerful.<sup>8</sup>

### Resources and Ruling Classes

The powerful positions in society are always those that involve *significant control over major social resources*, which are 1. means of *production* (resources like equipment and raw materials used to make goods or services); 2. means of *administration* (that govern society); and 3. means of *coercion* (the resources of violence, including armies, police and prisons). These positions enable access to high salaries, as well as other sources of income such as shares in private firms that pay dividends, land that generates rent, and the ability to access other resources such as private contracts with the state. They do not always involve direct personal ownership of these resources (such as share certificates), but entail the control of major resources – including over investment decisions and how resources are used, as well over the work of other people – by a

small elite. It is the private property, if you like, of this *class*, even if it's not always the personal property of *individuals* in this elite.

We can label the group of people in society that control the major resources – the means of administration, coercion and production – the **ruling class**. The ruling class are the people that have control over one or more of these means, and this generally places their members in the top 10 percent of income earners, if not the top 1 percent; the working class has none of these means, and therefore is dependent on, and subject to, the ruling class – no matter how much equality the law proclaims.

You can have a fairly high income without much power, as with our nurses example, and a great deal of power with relatively low incomes. The average mayor in South Africa earns around R1.5 million<sup>9</sup> – not that much more than our nurse, or even artisans in the municipality with rare skills, like millwrights – but the nurse and the millwright do not run the town or pass laws in parliament like the MP. So the difference lies not just in the *level of income*, but in the *social positions* that generate high incomes and the control over social resources connected to those positions.

### Keeping the Elites

The simple reality is that the transition in South Africa retained the major structures that enabled the centralization of major social resources in the hands of a few, and so the persistence of a social order controlled by a small ruling class. It did not challenge the basic system that centralized means of administration, coercion and production in the hands of a small ruling class, through capitalism and the state, and that left most people without control over any of these means and under the ruling class, capitalism and the state. What happened is that, instead, the former leaders of the national liberation movement, by and large, joined and reorganized the ruling class. The working class and poor remain at the bottom.

Many members of the ruling class loudly call for wealth redistribution: Ramaphosa of the ANC is a self-described socialist, for example,<sup>10</sup> many leaders of the South African Communist Party are also ANC leaders in senior government positions, and the Economic Freedom Fighters of Julius Malema – a breakaway from the ANC – describes itself as Marxist-Leninist. But by redistribution they either mean better conditions and more protections for the working class, a bigger share for the state section of the ruling class, or a bigger share for the black section of the ruling class. Thus, the purportedly radical EFF's 2019 election manifesto promised billions to support black capitalist industrialists plus R2 trillion (then around US\$143 billion) to fund black asset managers on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.<sup>11</sup>

None of this challenges the basic structures of the class system. The nationalists, centered in the state, are mainly concerned in changing the racial composition of control over means of administration, coercion and production, using Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies and legal reforms to fast-track the growth of a black elite, and none envisage a society where the working class owns the means and the ruling class vanishes from the stage. The old white economic elite, centered in the private sector, is keen to limit the impact of BEE and otherwise maintain business as usual but accepts that a black elite is essential. Both sides are interested in ensuring capitalist growth, and have since 1994 generally agreed that this needs a neo-liberal approach.

This nationalist agenda can be called "national-democratic revolution," or "decolonization," or "empowerment," or anything one likes, but it is about empowering an elite. This agenda is, in fact, *the core class project of nationalism* itself: a current in national

liberation struggles, nationalism represents the interests of frustrated local elites, and its solution is to deny class divisions among the oppressed, and to capture state power to achieve its goals. To bring the masses with it, nationalism champions many reforms and fights national oppression – which is why it is *progressive* relative to the national oppressor – but defends the class system and seeks the state – which why is it *reactionary* once in power. From then on, it moves from seeking to channel the energy of the masses, to now actively blocking the “revolutionary torrent” of the popular classes as they raise demands and needs beyond what the nationalists can tolerate.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the nationalists defend the two main structures of class rule.

## Capitalism

The first structure of class rule is capitalism. What this means is that we have a system where most means of production are controlled by a small class, and most people are dependent on working for this class in return for wages. If they did not work, they would not get wages; and if they did not get wages, they would not get income, as they do not control any major means of administration, coercion or production.

Furthermore, capitalism is based on producing for profit and power (things have to be sold, and have to sell for more than the cost of making them); and involves exploitation (wages paid to workers are generally less than the value of what they produce). In fact, it is this “unpaid” work that forms the core of the profits that are gained when the products are sold. And since production is for profit and power, the choice on whether to employ people at all, and for what wages, is not based on human needs.

This basic system operates in both privately owned and state-owned resources – I do not think it useful to reduce capitalism to the private sector; its key features exist in the state sector. For example, despite its recent problems, ESKOM, which is 100% state-owned, was for many years one of the five most profitable electricity companies in the world.<sup>13</sup>

When I argue that the capitalist structure is oppressive, I am not arguing that capitalist firms do not carry out vital functions, such as providing food, books, data, housing and electricity. I am simply arguing that this is done with an eye on profit and power, which distorts what is made and how it is made, and which ensures that many people are neglected. Essentially, capitalist corporations have a monopoly over the production of many vital goods and services, and use this to enrich and empower the small elite that controls the corporations. I am also not arguing that everyone in the capitalist corporation is an oppressor: I am arguing, in fact, that the bosses oppress the majority of people in the corporation itself, the workers.

## The State

The second major structure of class rule is the state. The means of production are centralized in two main bodies, one being the private capitalist firm (such as Shoprite, or Anglo-American) and the other being the state including in the state-owned corporations (such as ESKOM or SAA). In fact, the state also controls other means of production, such as roads, railways, land (the government owns almost a quarter of the land surface of South Africa), dams, some mines, hotels, etc.

But a distinguishing feature of the state is that it is also the main site where most of the means of administration and the means of coercion are centralized.

Let us look at municipalities again, that is, at the local state. For example, we know that around 1,500 people work here, in

our local Makana municipality. The majority are people involved in manual jobs, ranging from cleaning roads to fixing pipes and power lines, followed by people in administrative (or desk) jobs, or law enforcement, like the traffic department.

The basic decisions in the municipality are, however, taken by the elected council in conjunction with the unelected permanent management of the municipal strictures. In practice, the municipality is run by an executive comprising the (elected) mayor plus five councillors in charge of the key portfolios (like infrastructure, or safety), and the (unelected) municipal manager and central finance officer. This executive works with senior provincial and national government departments to run the town, in consultation with the larger local private capitalists.

The point is simply that the system centralizes means of administration, coercion and production in the hands of a few, and that those few are part of a larger ruling class in the town, including the other municipal councillors and managers, and the local capitalists, as well as heads of other major institutions, like the local High Court, Rhodes University, the army base, the police and the prison.

So, when I argue that the state is oppressive, I am not arguing that states do not carry out vital functions, such as providing electricity, or roads, or schools. I am arguing that states operate a monopoly over many of these functions, using this to enrich and empower the small elite heading the state, which also exploits and dominates the majority of people in the state itself, the workers.

Thus, the Makana municipal council in this town has consistently rejected calls from poorer communities to improve services and living conditions in the townships. At the same time, it denies communities – especially the black African and Coloured townships – the means that would enable them to fix the problem directly. This endless standoff led in to a court case that saw the High Court rule in 2019 that the municipal council must be dissolved for gross human right violations, with new elections held.<sup>14</sup> The council has rejected the decision, using government resources provided by the provincial state to appeal the case.

This is an example of the top-down character of the state, and how it – like the private capitalist firm – is run from above, by small groups who serve their own interests. As with a capitalist corporation, decisions come from the top down, by and for the elite in charge. Many people in Makana, understandably frustrated with the failure of the municipality to maintain roads and water systems or upgrade the townships see the problem as a bloated municipality with too many staff. But the fact is that the average municipal worker is as powerless as the average township resident in how things are run, and bears no responsibility for the mismanagement that comes from the top. Thus, like the private capitalists, the state managers take control over vital economic and social functions, run them in hierarchical, exploitative and self-interested ways – often badly, in fact – and use this to extract resources.

## Myth of a “Public” Sector

This brings us to a larger issue, which is the nature of the state. People habitually refer to the state’s property as “public” property, i.e. the property of the people, to the realm of state economic activity as a “public” sector, and assume that the state can be used by the ordinary citizen. If this was true, you could make direct decisions over how the means of production in state hands – the state is the single biggest organization in South Africa, and responsible for nearly a quarter of the entire Gross Domestic Product – but, as

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we can see with the Makana case, this is not possible. The mass of the people have no control over, nor rights to, state property – it is instead controlled by a small elite, part of the ruling class. If you think you, as a member of the public, own those assets, see if you can borrow a car from the municipal garages or take a computer from the municipal offices on the basis that you are part of the public, and that its “public property.” We should drop the term “public sector” and simply say “state sector,” avoiding the myths.

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The basic pattern is the same in the state and the private sector: a few people make decisions, decide how to use the means of administration, coercion and production, and receive the bulk of the benefits. These people are the ruling class. The ruling class has a vested interest in the perpetuation of the current order in which it has a direct interest – and without which, it cannot exist.

And what this means is that, in South Africa as elsewhere, the majority of people remain exploited (they are paid less than they are producing) and dominated (they are bossed around and do not make basic decisions over their lives). *They are the working class*: the great majority including the poor, unemployed and their families, and the workers of all grades and types without power. They are the oppressed majority, oppressed as members of the working class and due to other forms of oppression, created or reinforced by capitalism and the state, like racism. Racism, argued Mozambican Marxist leader Samora Machel of the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO), was “one of the most degrading and humiliating forms of the system of the exploitation of man by man, the instrument preferred by the reactionary classes to divide, isolate and wipe out the progressive forces.”<sup>15</sup>

The interests of the working class are incompatible with the current order, which causes its suffering; the interests of the ruling class are completely dependent on the current order, which makes a ruling class possible. *The nexus of this oppression in South Africa is the black working class*: it is on this mass that oppression is concentrated through the state and capitalism, which perpetuate a cheap black labor system and the apartheid legacy for the masses. And, obviously, the transition from apartheid has been, for this mass, an *incomplete liberation*. Only this class can take us to a better society, but this requires breaking with the nationalists.

### **The Problem is not Bad Attitudes**

Why did the national liberation struggle in South Africa come to this path? It is important to dispel a few mistaken explanations of why postcolonial elites generally – and the post-apartheid nationalist elite, centered on the ANC leadership specifically – actively entrench inequality, oppress the popular classes, and enrich themselves.

One common, but mistaken, understanding is that the problem does not lie in the nationalist program, but with a few leaders. The issue might be a moral one (the leaders are too greedy), or a psychological one (the leaders are too influenced by “foreign” ideas, or are “mentally colonized”), or an attitudinal one (the leaders are not nationalist enough, or are “too intellectual,” or are out of touch with their culture). The solution is then just to have better nationalist leaders: more honest, more sincerer, tougher.

But this does not explain the outcomes things very well. Even states that are not very corrupt – for example, Botswana – rule over highly unequal class-divided societies. The replacement of the highly corrupt and widely-loathed Zuma by the (relatively) scandal-free Ramaphosa has not changed the basic system in South Africa. Many postcolonial leaders deeply involved in corruption, among them

Zuma and Malema, are aggressively nationalist. As FRELIMO, in its long-lost radical years noted,<sup>16</sup> many “bourgeois,” “reactionary” regimes of “new exploiters” eagerly embraced nationalist ideas like “Negritude and African authenticity” to justify their actions.<sup>17</sup>

Seeing the problem in terms of bad individuals just cannot explain why nationalists everywhere, in every continent and of every color, have delivered the same basic results. *What we see when nationalism is in state power in postcolonial countries is not a betrayal of the nationalist project, it is the nationalist project*. A change in the individual leaders, or even of the nationalist faction in charge, can certainly make a difference to *how* the project runs, but it can't change the basic project, and the fact that it is deeply embedded in class, capitalism and the state.

### **The Problem is not Compromises**

Another common, but mistaken, understanding of why South Africa ended up where it did, sees the problem as the nationalists making too many compromises in the negotiations that ended apartheid in the early 1990s. Some who take this position blame Joe Slovo of the SACP, who proposed “Sunset Clauses” to assist the transition; others blame Nelson Mandela of the ANC, seen as too willing to appease the whites.

But this explanation also flounders in the face of the facts. The ANC never “sold out” its core program: it was always committed to a democratic, new, essentially capitalist South Africa, which would “open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous Non-European bourgeois class,” so that “private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before.”<sup>18</sup> And to this, one could add that the Freedom Charter also stated: “All people shall have equal rights to trade where they choose, to manufacture and to enter all trades, crafts and professions.”

The Sunset Clauses proposed by the ANC via Slovo do not explain much. Compromises, in themselves, are not defeats: sometimes they are tactical retreats that enable strategic gains, as was the case here. The Sunset Clauses did not involve any long-term compromise in policy, nor set up a power-sharing system. They only involved guaranteeing existing state officials and employees their jobs for five years, and their pensions thereafter,<sup>19</sup> plus promising a short-term government of national unity. In return for these modest concessions, the ANC was able to neutralize a large, dangerous reactionary bloc of disgruntled homeland dictators and chiefs, white army officers and farmers and lower-level black and white apartheid-era civil servants threatening civil war.<sup>20</sup>

And, even before the five years were up, the ANC secured an iron grip on the state that it has never let go. Using this, it has been able to rapidly expand the black elite, including through BEE and the take-over of state corporations like ESKOM by ANC loyalists.

The 1994 compromise shaped the precise *form* of the capitalism, and the state, that succeeded apartheid, and the skill, ruthlessness and appeal of the ANC helped ensure that it was the leading party in the new state. A different transition would have involved a different form. The fact that the transition took place in the era of neo-liberalism shaped what the new government could do, but if it had been established in 1964 it would still have been capitalist and still built a black elite – just with *different methods*, based on the state-led capitalism of that lost era.

The basic structure – class-based, capitalist and statist – would have been in place, with the leaders of the ruling party changed by participation in the state, into a part of the ruling class. As part of the ruling class, they shared its interests – and like their older counterparts in the old system, big white business, the chiefs and

the top officials, their interests became irrevocably tied to maintaining the class system, and with it, the oppression of the mass of the people, the working class and poor.

### **The Problem is not the ANC**

A final, but mistaken, understanding of why South Africa ended up where it did is the idea that the ANC alone has failed. The idea is, then, that one of the small rival nationalist parties, like the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) which came from the Black Consciousness movement of Steve Biko, or the Pan-Africanist Congress, an ANC breakaway advocating an ultra-nationalist program, or even the EFF, would do a better job.

There are many problems with this explanation. The basic pattern of the top 1 out of 10 people getting most of the income, and a small minority controlling most of the means of administration, coercion and production exists, in pretty much every modern society worldwide – and certainly in every country where nationalists took power. No nationalist government, anywhere, has ever abolished this system – this includes ruling nationalist parties in Africa influenced by Negritude, Black Consciousness and Pan-Africanism. Even where nationalist movements won power militarily – as in Algeria – the same pattern of inequality remained in place. If people of the stature of Mandela, Slovo and Ramaphosa – all great heroes in their time, who terrified the apartheid regime – could not deliver real freedom for most people after taking state power, why should we expect better of the leaders of parties who failed to win power or sustain widespread influence?

### **The Limits of the Nationalist Model**

The limits of the nationalist model of national liberation need to be addressed. The national liberation struggle in South Africa *could* have gone in many directions, including revolutionary syndicalism. It was, however, captured by the nationalists. The nationalists accepted the basic framework of class, capitalism and the state. They aimed to make it more democratic, more inclusive of black people, and fairer. Their core aim was to capture state power, and use it to provide freedom from above. Although the nationalist parties' membership included, as did their leadership, many people of working-class background, the *essential class project* of these movements was a mixture of the aspirations of the oppressed black middle class of frustrated professionals and small capitalists, and of an aspirant, frustrated, black bourgeoisie. The *class content* of a movement is not defined by a survey of its *class composition*: even the big, openly neo-liberal parties have, everywhere, millions of working-class supporters; they could hardly be elected if they were restricted to members of the ruling class. What is decisive is what *class interests* are served by the party.<sup>21</sup>

Further, they were multi-class parties – as nationalists, they aimed to unite the largest possible range of forces in the nation – they always accommodated local capitalists, as well as the chieftaincy, one of the major landlords. You cannot bring black capitalists into a nationalist movement if your aim is to abolish capitalism – which means abolishing their class status as much as that of white or of overseas capitalists. To make the multi-class popular front at which they aimed possible, they accepted that the new nation would have different classes and, to keep the capitalists in, they had to have capitalism as the class system. That is, they accepted the class system, and with it the antagonistic interests of classes, and they chose to continue a system in which an elite oppressed a mass.

Some, like a section of the ANC, aimed to abolish “white monopoly capital” (“WMC”), but that is not the same thing as

abolishing capitalism. Is black monopoly capitalism kinder, or neo-liberal free market capitalism better than monopoly capitalism? For the frustrated black bourgeoisie, perhaps, but as we have seen at Lonmin at Marikana the difference for the working class will be minimal: Lonmin mines in South Africa is 30% owned by the South African state, includes major shareholdings by ANC leaders like Ramaphosa, and is not traditional South African WMC, yet is infamous for massacring black miners at Marikana, on August 16, 2012.

And, even if the whole elite in South Africa was black, the majority of people in low-wage jobs and poor would still be black, for the simple reason that this is the majority of the population and we have a system – like other countries – that keeps most people poor, powerless and exploited. Unless you have a society that fundamentally redistributes wealth and power, the majority will not have wealth or power. You will have, instead, a society where a small ruling class is in charge and rules society to its own benefit. It is, as Mikhail Bakunin noted, the “iron logic” of wielding state power that makes the nationalist heroes of yesterday into part of the ruling class today, and so into “enemies of the people.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The State is Part of the Problem**

Even where these nationalists spoke of socialism, as ANC, EFF, PAC, AZAPO and EFF have all done at times, what they meant was an economy run by the state, or in which the state had a very large role. *Where they spoke of socialism, this meant essentially a larger state sector, and that meant, simply, that a small elite would remain in charge, dominating and exploiting workers, while serving its own class interests.* They did not envisage getting rid of wage labor, but instead, having the state as the main employer of wage labor. They did not envisage a system where ordinary people ran the economy democratically, but rather that the state would run the economy from above.

*The state is part of the problem.* The state is fundamentally incompatible with a democratic system where the broad population is regularly involved in, and engaged in, making decisions. The state, moreover, is dependent – as we have seen with crystal clarity over the last two years in South Africa – on the health of the economy, which in modern days means capitalism – and over the last forty years, neo-liberal capitalism, which is based on privatization, free trade, flexible labor and attracting private investors.

More state ownership does not challenge the class nature of capitalism, or its ills. The apartheid state had a larger state sector than the post-apartheid state, and many apartheid homelands had their own state industries. None of these were in any way socialist. To say state ownership is a measure of socialism, we would be forced to conclude that apartheid was more socialist than post-apartheid, and that the highpoint of the apartheid state's control of the economy – the 1960s under Hendrik Verwoerd – was more socialist than the last years of apartheid under F.W. De Klerk.

In South Africa today, the state is the single largest employer, the largest landowner, and owns some of the largest corporations in Africa: ESKOM is a multi-national corporation, active in over 30 countries. It is 100% state-owned, yet is exploitative, corrupt and oppressive towards the working class. These are expected to make profit, and in doing so, they operate in roughly the same way as private capitalist firms. The state is the twin of the private capitalist corporation, not its enemy and certainly not the force that can abolish classes.

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## Conclusion:

### At a Distance from the State

It is pointless to try revive the old ANC, AZAPO or PAC traditions. *We are where we are because these nationalists could not bring us anywhere better.*

What is needed, then, is a politics that aims at change, but is *autonomous* of the state and of elections and corporatism; that is sceptical of the state, yet rejects the free market and capitalism; a politics centered on building mass movements of counter-power, and a popular counter-culture, that can resist the current system, and form the *infrastructure* of a new social system based on direct democracy, participation, political pluralism and common ownership.

The issue is not, in the final analysis, a choice between more or less state ownership. It is a choice between common ownership, based on self-management by the majority, and minority ownership by a small ruling class – either through private corporations or through the state.

**NOTES:** 1. Natrass, N. & J. Seekings, 2001, “Two nations”? Race and economic inequality in South Africa today. *Daedalus* 130 (1), 49. 2. Aroop Chatterjee, Léo Czajka and Amory Gethin, 10 March 2020, “Estimating the Distribution of Household Wealth in South Africa,” WISER seminar, Wits. 3. In 2014: see <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10> 4. World Inequality Database, pre-tax income: [www.indexmundi.com/facts/indicators/SI.DST.10TH.10](http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/indicators/SI.DST.10TH.10) 5. [www.payscale.com/research/SA/Job=Registered\\_Nurse\\_\(RN\)/Salary](http://www.payscale.com/research/SA/Job=Registered_Nurse_(RN)/Salary) 6. In 2018 ESKOM was the 4<sup>th</sup> largest Africa-based profit-making corporation by turnover: *The Africa Report*, July-September 2019, “Top 500 African Companies,” number 108, pp. 83-97. 7. This is a general problem of measuring class by income. Understanding class as a structure, rather than an income bracket, moves us away from measuring exact incomes to examining the assets that generate income, and therefore shape who goes into what bracket, and then understanding these in the context of the larger social structure. We need to think about shares, investments and property on the one side, as well as positions within large organizations like the state and the private corporation, on the other. 8. For more: Lucien van der Walt, 2018, “Back to the future: Revival, relevance and route of an anarchist/ syndicalist approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century left, labour and national liberation movements,” in Kirk Helliker and Lucien van der Walt (eds.), *Politics at a distance from the state: Radical and African perspectives*, Routledge, 40-59. 9. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/118999/how-much-money-mayors-ministers-and-members-of-parliament-get-paid-in-south-africa/> 10. <https://irr.org.za/media/ramaphosa-says-he2019s-a-socialist-2013-believe-him-rational-standard> 11. Shawn Hattingh, 10 April 2019, “What is authoritarian populism and why should it be combatted?” *Pambazuka News*, [www.pambazuka.org/democracy-governance/what-authoritarian-populism-and-why-should-it-be-combatted](http://www.pambazuka.org/democracy-governance/what-authoritarian-populism-and-why-should-it-be-combatted) 12. Ba Jin (Li Pei Kan), [1927] 2005, “Anarchism and the question of practice,” in Robert Graham (ed.), *Anarchism: a documentary history*, volume 1, Black Rose, 326-36. 13. In 2005, ESKOM’s after-tax-profits-to-revenue were almost twice the median of the 23 electricity utilities listed in the Fortune 500 top global companies list: Stephen Greenberg, 2006, *The State, Privatisation and the Public Sector*, Cape Town: Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC), 39. 14. [www.grocotts.co.za/2020/01/14/upm-celebrates-makana-judgment/](http://www.grocotts.co.za/2020/01/14/upm-celebrates-makana-judgment/) 15. Quoted in Chris Searle, 1975, *Beyond the skin: How Mozambique is defeating racism*, Liberation, London, 5.

16. I will not discuss the trajectory of the Marxist-Leninist parties

like FRELIMO and SACP here. It is complicated and distinctive, including in its interaction with nationalism, and merits another paper. 17. Quoted in Searle, 1979, *Beyond the skin*, 24-25. 18. Nelson Mandela, July 1956, “In Our Lifetime,” *Liberation*. 19. Not at all difficult, as the main pension fund had built up massive reserves from the 1980s. 20. Joe Slovo, 1992, “Negotiations: What Room for Compromise,” *African Communist*, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, 36-40.

21. It may have been possible at certain junctures for the nationalist parties to be captured by the working class, and transformed. That is another discussion. What matters here is that they were not. 22. Mikhail Bakunin, [1873] 1971, “Statism and Anarchy,” in Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *Bakunin on anarchy*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 343.