

The EFF: populism not socialism

With the electoral breakthrough of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in the 2014 elections, a party to the left of the ANC has for the first time won significant representation. Since taking up their seats, the 25 MPs and 30 MPLs of the EFF have rarely been out of the headlines and have scored important propaganda blows against the ANC.

They have exposed the facade of capitalist democracy and demonstrated the institutionalised conspiracy in parliament that uses colonial-inspired 'etiquette' and 'decorum' to cover-up criminal acts such as the murder by the state of mineworkers at Marikana and the theft of public money by Zuma for his homestead at Nkandla. They have shaken-up the cosy status-quo between the ruling party and all the other opposition parties and exposed that there has never been an 'opposition' worthy of that name. For their defiant stands they have been persecuted, evicted from the chambers, sometimes violently, and threatened with suspension.

Whilst parliament may finally be "interesting" as many commentators have observed, the crucial question remains: can the EFF be a vehicle for advancing the fundamental interests of the working class?

by Mamefwe Sebei

Who supports the EFF?

The emergence of the EFF is an expression of the deep anger in South African society over continued poverty, inequality and racism. The EFF's main base of support is amongst the youth and urban poor but they also enjoy the support of sections of the black capitalist class, and the black middle class who dominate their cadre.

The EFF is not a working class party and the organised working class remains sceptical. For example, the largest trade union in the country – the metalworkers' NUMSA – withdrew support from the ANC in the run up to the 2014 elections but decided not to support the EFF. However, some workers will have voted for the EFF in the feeling that this would deal the hated ANC the hardest blow.

What is the EFF?

The EFF is a left-populist party. Populism is characterised by a radical appeal to 'the people' against 'an elite', but an appeal that is not made along clear class lines. Left-populism makes an appeal to the poor against the wealthy and is in keeping with the Freedom Charter's ideas of limited nationalisation and a non-racial democracy which the ex-ANC Youth League dominated EFF leadership still base themselves upon.

For the working class, the Freedom Charter was seen as the key to improving their living standards. They gave the Charter a socialist content. But the leaders of the ANC did not interpret the Charter in this way. Only by fully implementing the nationalisation clause of the Freedom Charter upon the basis of worker and community control as part of a planned socialist economy, would it have been possible to lay the basis for socialism. But the Charter was silent upon such revolutionary measures as is the EFF's leadership. Mandela's

ANC abandoned the Charter in the face of ferocious opposition to nationalisation from big business. The pressure to capitulate to big business pressure, as the ANC did, in today's far less favourable circumstances of global capitalist stagnation, will be irresistible without a perspective for mass struggle and socialist revolution.

There is also a right-populist trend within the EFF leadership under the influence of black nationalism, which uses the ideas of 'race' and 'nation', casting the ANC as 'collaborators' who have betrayed a so-called 'black nation'. It is of course crucial to combat racism in all its forms – the racism suffered by black workers at the hands of white employers, the inequality and poverty suffered by black people relative to whites and all other forms of discrimination. As the overwhelming majority in society, a genuinely democratic South Africa would be black-ruled. But this still does not answer which class rules society. Nationalism is incapable of answering this question, because it, too, fails to make its appeal along class lines.

In South Africa, more than anywhere, race and class are intertwined. But it is necessary to untangle them to recognise the class and capitalist foundations upon which racism and discrimination rest. Only socialism can offer genuine liberation for the working class black majority and place control of society in their hands. The working class does not want to swap white bosses for black bosses who will continue their class oppression. It is the blind forces of capitalism that compel bosses to hold down wages and make retrenchments. Those forces will operate whatever the skin colour of the boss.

Is the EFF socialist?

These EFF's cross class character is reflected in their manifesto which leaves the foundations



EFF leader Julius Malema in parliament sporting his red workers' overalls.

of capitalism intact meaning the exploitation of the working class would continue. The EFF describes itself as 'Marxist-Leninist', a core idea of which is that the state in any society is always the state of the ruling class. As the ANC government demonstrated by killing workers in Marikana, it heads a capitalist state which is used to defend the bosses and their system against the working class. Marx himself said that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes". Rather, the working class must dismantle the capitalist state and build their own working class state in its place. But in the introduction to the EFF's manifesto Malema says that the aim of the EFF is to "control the state through electoral politics in order to transform it..."

It is crucial to point the working class toward the tasks necessary to change society, not sow confusion as the EFF does on the question of the state. WASP raises the need for worker and community control of nationalised industry – the banks, the mines, the commercial farms, the big factories and big businesses. Drawing the mass of the working class into the day-to-day running of society through the formation of worker and community committees linked up at sector, industry and national level will be the foundation of a working class state that can begin the construction of a socialist society.

Struggle for nationalisation

The EFF's partial-nationalisation policy only calls for the nationalisation of 60% of the mines and other strategic sectors of the economy. But genuine working class control cannot be exercised when the capitalist class continues to own 40%. The industry as a whole will have to make profits for the capitalist owners of that 40%, wealth that could be used

to benefit everyone in society.

But more, the EFF's position on nationalisation has the potential to demobilise the working class to spectators in the struggle to change society. Their message amounts to: 'vote for us, and we will sort it out for you'. Whilst a socialist majority in the National Assembly might be able to vote through nationalisation legislation, unless such this was backed-up by a mass movement to implement it on the ground the capitalist class would sabotage it. The working class must be mobilised in struggle to complete the tasks necessary for the socialist transformation of society.

Where is the EFF going?

The EFF leadership will come under relentless pressure from the capitalist class to move to the right and further water down the more radical aspects of their programme. But they will come

under pressure from their base to move to the left, and enjoying the luxury of opposition, may do so. This will be the case particularly as the South African economy continues to deteriorate and the ANC rolls-out the neo-liberal National Development Plan.

The contradictions in the class composition of the EFF will result in zig-zags in policy even if the leadership can contain these contradictions and continue to grow for a period, especially on the basis of their strong performance in the 2014 elections.

The EFF does not answer the strategic task faced by the working class in this period – the creation of a mass working class party on a clear socialist programme. But despite its shortcomings it has demonstrated the enormous potential that exists for a left political alternative to the ANC in the post-Marikana period.

IZWI SAYS:

Many genuine youth, in particular, understandably look towards the EFF in the search for a vehicle to fundamentally change society; hoping they have found the shortest route to realising the hopes betrayed by the ANC. But such change requires nothing less than a socialist revolution. What many EFF supporters are really looking for – a strong socialist party to lead this task – they will not find in the EFF, despite the red costumes. WASP has said 'no' to dissolving itself into the EFF for this reason.

But as socialists engage in struggles, they must strive for maximum working class unity in action. So where WASP members encounter the EFF on the ground, supporting struggle, they should try to build fraternal relations. This does not mean writing the EFF a blank cheque. Genuine support should be welcomed; attempts to hijack struggles condemned. While occasionally working together on this basis, WASP members must always maintain WASP's independent banner and explain firmly that only WASP's programme offers a real revolutionary socialist alternative. Over time, this approach could also assist EFF supporters to gain the experience that could lead them to the genuine article – WASP.