



Our organising principles

**The revolutionary party
and democratic centralism**



How can we change society?

What must we do?

Across the world the capitalist profit system means poverty, inequality and unemployment for the majority. Millions do not have jobs, basic services like water and sanitation, or even a house. Those 'lucky' enough to have jobs suffer low-wages, long hours and uncertain futures because of outsourcing and labour broking. At the same time we can easily see the wealth of the millionaires and the billionaires – wealth that was created by workers!

Workers and young people struggle against this unfair system every day – in strikes for higher wages, service delivery protests and student struggles for free education. Working class people understand the need for organisation to fight effectively. There is a proud history of working class people in South Africa, and across the world, building trade unions, community organisations and even political parties to fight for their interests.

Today, WASP is committed to the struggle to rebuild working class organisation in the workplaces, the communities and on the campuses. We are also fighting to unite the struggles of these three 'theatres' by building a mass workers party.

But even when we win victories – even major ones, such as the overthrow of apartheid – the struggle always continues. As soon as we relax even a tiny bit, the bosses and their politicians take back the things we have won, for example by cutting wages, closing hospitals or breaking promises to build houses. That is because the capitalist system has remained in place and the bosses have been left in control.

We must of course continue to struggle against the bosses and their politicians every

day. We must try and win every possible improvement in our lives. But whilst we do that we need to prepare the struggle to end all struggles – the struggle to end capitalism and replace it with *socialism*.

Socialism would end the bosses' control of society by nationalising the banks, the mines, the commercial farms, the big factories and big businesses and placing them under the democratic control of workers and communities. Then we could use society's wealth to end unemployment, raise wages, fund free education, quality service delivery and build decent houses.

Building powerful trade unions and other working class organisations to mobilise mass movements is extremely important for the struggle for socialism. We can use these organisations to push the bosses all the way to the wall. General strikes and mass movements can even bring down governments. But it is only a *party* that can organise the working class for the struggle to *replace* the rule of the bosses so that they never come back.

Without a party mass movements of the working class have been incapable of winning power, despite enormous heroism and sacrifice. At best they remove one representative of the capitalist class only to see him replaced by another – in just the last few years that has meant swapping Mubarak for el-Sisi in Egypt; Compaoré for Kafando in Burkina Faso. The history of the revolutions and counter-revolutions of the past 150 years teaches us that to end capitalism and create a socialist society the working class needs a party. But not just any party. It needs a *revolutionary party*.

The revolutionary party

A revolutionary party is not like any of the

capitalist parties that dominate politics in 'normal' times. Those parties are vehicles for elites to control society and protect the right of the capitalist minority to exploit the working class majority. Those parties all defend the capitalist system even if they fight each other over who will control it.

A revolutionary party is different because it exists to **end** the capitalist system once and for all. We want to end the rule of the bosses and place the working class majority in power. That will take mass struggle of workers, communities and young people.

We are building WASP as a tool for that struggle. In the hands of a mass working class membership the party we are building can be used to end capitalism.

The revolutionary party's membership rests on two pillars – the workers and the youth. The party must be part of working class life. It must take part in the daily struggles and experience the ups and downs of life side-by-side with the masses.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx said that "the Communists [by which he meant the revolutionary party] have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat [working class] as a whole". However, by having a clear programme the revolutionary party takes part in struggle as the working class **conscious** of its historic role in the struggle for a socialist society.

In the *History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky, further explained that "without a guiding organisation the energy of the masses would dissipate [disappear] like steam not enclosed in a piston box. But, nevertheless, what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam". Or said another way, the working class is the force that will overthrow capitalism; but the revolutionary party is the leadership that

will enable the working class to accomplish that task.

Internationalism

The socialist revolution is an international revolution. The countries (or nation-states) that exist today only emerged with capitalism. They were not always there. The oldest in Europe are maybe 3-400 years old. Here in Africa most are not more than 70 years old! But the capitalist economy long-ago outgrew its many national borders.

Today, if the bosses want to use the most modern and efficient industrial methods and techniques (from their point of view the most profitable!) they must produce for a **world market**. The domestic (or home) market of any one country is too small. For example, China alone produces enough steel to supply the whole world. Economic crises and wars take place when the capitalist classes of each country compete with each other over which of them will control the world market.

Only a worldwide **democratic socialist plan of production** can end the destructive competition of capitalism. The organisation of such a plan will unleash the next phase of human development and allow us to massively raise living standards.

Karl Marx said that the working class has no country. What exactly did he mean? Obviously we were all born in one country or another! What he meant was that **class conscious** workers, i.e. those workers who understand that socialism is the only chance for themselves and their families to have a decent life, must see that their day-to-day struggles are part of the **worldwide struggle** against capitalism. This understanding we call **internationalism**.

To think that it is possible to build socialism in South Africa alone is to look backwards

to capitalism, not forward to socialism. The isolation of the 1917 workers' revolution within the national borders of economically under-developed Russia created the conditions for the rise of Stalin's bureaucratic dictatorship. The bureaucracy justified its dictatorship by abandoning internationalism and arguing for "socialism in one country". Internationally this meant a policy of "peaceful co-existence" with imperialism and sabotaging revolutions around the world. Ultimately the Stalinist system collapsed.

Internationalism must be reflected in how we organise the revolutionary party. Workers need a worldwide revolutionary party, or what we call an *International*, to co-ordinate struggle, build solidarity and by doing so lay the basis for the future co-operation across borders of the world working class for the task of building socialism. WASP is affiliated to the Committee for a Workers International (CWI) which has sections in more than forty countries on every continent.

Programme

A revolutionary party starts with a clear programme. But for us a programme is more than just a simple election manifesto. The details of an election manifesto change. For example, the minimum wage we call for can change depending on many things, including the rate of inflation, the level of unemployment, and what workers themselves believe is possible. We would say that flexible demands like these are not *principled positions*.

When we talk about a programme we must be clear that we *are* also talking about our principled positions. These are the foundations of our programme and are (1) our commitment to struggle for socialism,

(2) our understanding that socialism can only be created by the mass revolutionary struggles of the working class, and (3) the role of Marxism as our guiding theory because it is based upon the experience of working class struggle to change society throughout history.

Agreement with these basic ideas is the reason to join WASP. These foundations are not 'open for debate' in their fundamentals. If they were there would be no point in being organised in a party. Trotsky explained that, "the internal democracy of a revolutionary party is not a goal in itself. It must be supplemented and bounded by centralism. For a Marxist the question has always been: democracy for what? For which program? The framework of the programme is at the same time the framework of democracy." The party is a vehicle for implementing our program.

Democratic centralism

How we organise the revolutionary party is guided by the task we are building it for – the struggle for socialism. Trotsky explained that "a revolutionary organisation is not the prototype [rough first draft] of the future [democratic socialist] state, but merely the instrument for its creation. An instrument ought to be adapted to fashioning the product; it ought not to include the product."

What he meant was that we are not building socialism *within* our party but building our party to *end capitalism* – a revolutionary party is not a co-operative but a combat organisation for the class struggle and must be built as such!

The experience of the working class has shown that the organising principles of *democratic centralism* are the only ones that give the party the *flexibility* to seize

opportunities presented by the twists and the turns of the class struggle. Acting quickly to grab these opportunities is the only way to push forward to socialism.

In general, democratic centralism means full democratic discussion throughout the party. This is necessary to create political unity by debating ideas and examining different options for the way forward. But when a way forward is agreed, every member is expected to remain united to carry out that decision. This is the centralism which makes a revolutionary party capable of seizing opportunities.

Of course, these working class principles will be very familiar to workers in trade unions. Democratic centralism is the basis for organising in the workplace too. In a strike, amagundwane (rats – strike breakers) are dealt with harshly because they ignore the majority decision to strike.

But whereas trade unions only use democratic centralism in a single workplace or industry, the revolutionary party aims to extend it to the entire working class organised under its banner. This level of organisation and discipline will be needed if the working class is to move as a united revolutionary movement capable of defeating the bosses.

Ultimately, in a revolutionary party the majority must decide the way forward; those in a minority must remain united and help carry-out the majority decision. But democratic centralism is more flexible than this simple rule. In some cases it would be a mistake to treat a simple majority as enough. For example, on major issues, such as a tactical change in the party's work, or the revision of a long-held slogan, time must be made for democratic discussion even if a majority for change already exists. This is to build the maximum political clarity within the party.

But on the other hand, discussions cannot continue forever. If an immediate decision is demanded by the situation, for example whether to take part in a particular strike or demonstration that is starting soon, a majority, even of 51 to 49, will have to be the basis for action. But again, it would be a mistake not to immediately go back to the issue in democratic discussion as soon as possible. Indeed, experience will now tell us whether the majority or the minority was correct (or just as likely – a bit of both!) and we will be able to learn valuable lessons.

In the revolutionary party majorities cannot be used to silence debate. Minorities have the right to create factions and tendencies (i.e. organised groups of the minority) *inside* the party around political issues. However, that right is balanced by the rule that factions are not permitted to undermine unity in action *outside* the structures of the party.

In a healthy revolutionary party, factions should be of an episodic character, i.e. they should exist only as long as the issue over which there is disagreement exists. In time the class struggle will tell us whether the majority or the minority was correct on a specific issue. Once we have that answer there is no need for the faction to continue.

Membership & political education

The membership of the revolutionary party must rest on the twin pillars of the working class and the youth. That does not mean that those from middle class backgrounds cannot join. They can! What it means is that without deep roots amongst workers and young people the party cannot hope to win the leadership of the working class for the struggle to change society. Therefore we must always ensure that the party is facing (or oriented to) these key groups.

The backbone of the revolutionary party is a politically educated and politically trained cadre recruited, first and foremost, from amongst the workers and the youth. ‘Cadre’ is the French word for ‘frame’ – the cadre is the frame around which the party is built. In the class struggle a well-trained cadre is the difference between victory and defeat. They are also the foundation for a healthy regime of democratic centralism.

Without a good level of political understanding amongst the cadre the democracy of the party does not really work. Members will find it hard to reach conclusions about new political developments, or assess if the leadership is taking the party in the right direction. Tireless political education is a practical necessity for a revolutionary party.

When it comes to action, without the confidence that comes with political understanding, the revolutionary party cannot play the full role in the class struggle that it needs to. Indeed, it is through the experience of mass work – participation in strikes, protests, elections and other campaigns – that our cadre will gain their greatest education.

The branch

To transform our cadre from individuals with good political ideas into revolutionaries able to influence the class struggle they must be organised into branches.

Branches are the *basic unit* of the revolutionary party and the key to democratic centralism. It is through the branches that the entire membership can take part in democratic discussions and work together to put decisions into practise. Well attended, well-organised branches are the key to a healthy party democracy.

The branch is where the party *interacts* with the working class. Through campaigns and activities branches are continuously testing the relevance to the working class of the party’s programme and campaigns. Our successes and failures with different campaigns tell us important things about the consciousness of the working class and their willingness to struggle, something which is always changing. Branches that are well rooted in the working class allow the party to quickly correct problems with our campaigns and slogans upon the basis of experience.

All of our branches must be organised as ‘war-councils’ for intervention in the class struggle. They are normally organised on geographical areas. But we are flexible – they can also be based on workplaces or campuses if the situation calls for it. Branches must take responsibility for organising political education, either in the branch meetings themselves, in extra workshops, or both. The campaigns of the party must be organised in the branch. Whilst branches should take direction from the national leadership about which campaigns to run, they must also not be scared to take initiatives and develop local campaigns. The branch must be present at every protest and strike in their area identifying working class activists and worker-leaders for recruitment to the party.

Leadership structures

For the party to co-ordinate the role that each of its members must play in the class struggle, and for our party’s programme to speak to the interests of the *entire* working class (i.e. workers – outsourced and permanent, in every industry and sector, the unemployed, learners, students, pensioners etc.) we need effective national

(and international) leadership. The level of co-ordinated struggle and political clarity necessary to change society cannot come from local branches operating in isolation from one another. The role of national leadership is to act as a *political centre* that can develop an overview of the class struggle and from that draw general conclusions about how the party should respond – they must see the bigger picture.

Leadership is crucial to make the revolutionary party an effective tool. A well organised leadership (at all levels) allows the party to respond quickly to the twists and turns of the class struggle. It is not always possible to organise a discussion of all members on all issues before the party acts. The leadership must guide the party as to where the balance between discussion and action lies.

The Congress, made up of delegates from all branches, is the highest body of the revolutionary party. It has the authority to decide on all matters and reverse any decision of any leadership structure. Via the Congress, the membership has the final say on all matters.

Delegates at Congresses (or any other decision making structure) cannot arrive with binding mandates (i.e. told by those that elected them that regardless of what happens they must vote in a particular way). The Congress would not be the highest body if this was the case. Indeed, there would be no point in a Congress if people arrived with their minds made up. Branches must of course thoroughly discuss all the issues faced by the party in the run-up to the Congress and candidate delegates must express their views. But the role of any decision making structure in a revolutionary party is to find a way forward. That is only possible if delegates come with an open mind to hear all sides in a debate.

But the Congress cannot be a permanent structure. We must have leadership at every level of the party *between* congresses. The Congress elects a National Committee (NC) whose membership reflects all areas and fields of party work. The NC in turn elects an Executive Committee (EC) responsible for the day-to-day leadership of the party.

This method of electing leadership is an important organising principle of democratic centralism. The Congress, the highest body of the party, elects the next level of leadership in the NC. The NC is accountable to the Congress and invested with its authority between its sittings. The NC in turn elects an EC which is accountable to the NC and is invested with its authority between its sittings. This enables the party to respond quickly to political developments but also builds-in checks and balances.

Branches must have elected branch committees accountable to the branch. Where we are organised enough we must also have regional and provincial committees accountable to the branches in their areas.

Collective leadership

We build all leadership structures in the revolutionary party according to the principle of *collective leadership*. That means that at every level of the party we elect a ‘team’ of comrades to give leadership. Taken as a whole, the team should have all the skills and qualities necessary to be effective.

For example, one comrade may be an excellent writer but a poor public speaker; another may have an excellent grasp of Marxist theory but be a poor organiser, and so on. In electing its leadership team the party acts like a football manager putting together a balance of talents on the pitch.

The skills needed by a striker are different to those of a defender or goalkeeper, but together all the skills must be present to allow the team to win a match.

To put together leadership teams we use a *slate* (or list) system. In the capitalist parties slates are created by cliques behind the backs of the membership. The members are then presented with the choice of rival slates in a destructive ‘winner takes all’ contest. This always sows the seeds for divisions and eventually splits.

But in the revolutionary party slates are created in full-view of the membership and in consultation with them. Slates are not presented as ‘take it or leave it’, but are open to the membership to amend. For example, at a Congress, delegates may propose that one or more candidates be removed from a slate if they think they are unsuitable for leadership. On the other hand they may propose an addition if they think a potential leader has been overlooked. The slate is finalised in the course of democratic discussion and debate.

Further, in the revolutionary party slates are used to *strengthen* the unity of the party. For example, if a minority is organised as a faction on a particular issue, they would not be kept off of the slate as would be normal in a capitalist party, they would be *included* so they can put forward their different point of view in an organised way within the structures of the party.

Candidates for leadership slates are selected based on their political ability, experience, party ‘patriotism’ and commitment to the struggle for socialism. In that sense, a revolutionary party is a genuine meritocracy; no ‘formal’ qualifications are required. In a revolutionary party there are no privileges of office, inflated salaries, or luxurious expenses. Revolutionary leaders

are marked-out by their willingness to make sacrifices for the struggle and the party.

This ‘collective’ principle does not mean that we do not want to create great individual leaders – the Lenins and Trotskys of this generation. We do. Every cadre of the party must aspire to be a party leader. But leaders will be ‘great’ only because they are the most capable of seeing and explaining the tasks faced by the working class to change society. In other words they will be ‘great’ because they are the best advocates for the party’s programme, itself drawn from the experience of the party and the working class. Lenin and Trotsky never claimed more than this for the decisive role they played in the Russian Revolution.

Build the party

Marxism is first and foremost a guide to action. Ideas are nothing if they do not have a vehicle to take them out of our heads and off of the page and into the struggles of the working class. Lenin’s greatest contribution to the working class was the idea of the revolutionary party and the principles upon which it should be organised. That is why Lenin, along with Trotsky, was able to lead the first victorious workers’ revolution in history.

Anyone who claims to be a Marxist and who does not take the building of the revolutionary party seriously has not understood the ABCs of our tradition. Whether you are a long-standing member of WASP, or completely new, if you want to see victorious workers revolutions in the future we say to you this:

build the party today!