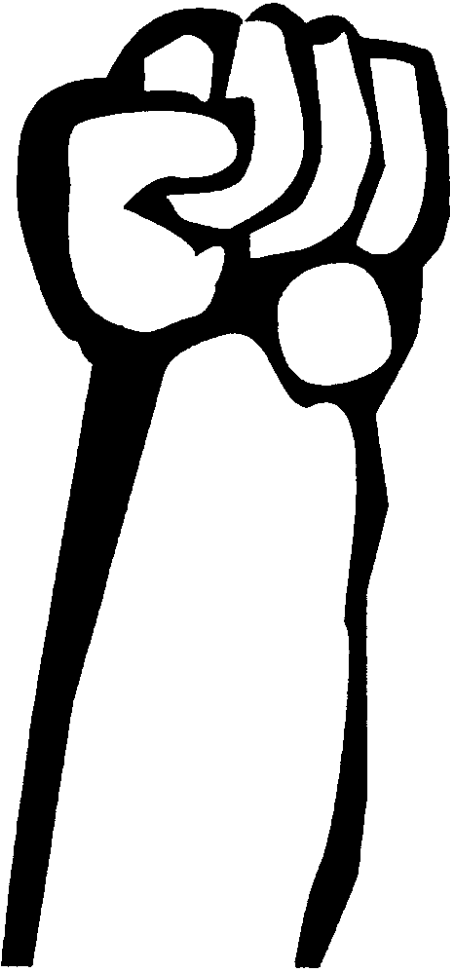


'FIGHTING ELECTIONS' - INSIDE OR OUTSIDE?



As South Africa's working-class social movements – the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Landless People's Movement, Anti-Eviction Campaign, Concerned Citizens' Forum and many others – continue their grassroots struggle to defend against the impact of neo-liberal capitalism, and as the state intensifies its repression against these movements, we are faced with a new challenge, in the form of the national and provincial elections to be held in 2004, and the local government elections that will follow in 2005.

The social movements cannot ignore these elections even if we wanted to. Everywhere people are being told that South Africa is a democracy and that voting is the most important power we can exercise. People are wondering who to vote for, and many are thinking about whether to vote at all. Soon the media will be hyping the elections as the Big Issue of the Year. And already the political parties are running around looking for votes. The ANC, troubled by loss of support, is aiming to rebuild its branch structures. It is trying all sorts of tricks to make people believe in it again. People who have been evicted from their homes by the ANC government, are now approached by ANC campaigners bringing food parcels, trying to pretend they care about the people.

There can be no question, then, that elections will affect our movements, that we cannot ignore them, that we must respond to them. We can only decide how to respond. Some have said, and will say, that we should put up candidates for elections, get our comrades into parliament and councils, and perhaps, now or later, aim to transform the social movements into a 'Workers' Party' to challenge the ANC. We anarchists believe that this approach is hopeless. Not only do we have no hope now, in the face of the powerful organisation of the major parties, and the enormous funds they receive from their rich supporters, of getting anywhere near enough MPs or councillors to make a difference; but even if we did, and even if we can do this sometime in the future, they would never continue to serve our own interests, the interests of workers and the poor. Parliaments are not forums for the poor and the workers, but for the rich and the bosses. Their members are privileged and are separated from the lives and problems of ordinary people. They end up talking not about how to help the poor but about how to help the rich exploit the poor. Even then the real decisions are not made in parliament but in the cabinet and in corporate boardrooms. And even those sent to parliament by the poor end up joining the representatives of the rich in this game of smoke and mirrors. When Workers' Parties, or Labour Parties, or Socialist Parties enter parliament, however good their intentions may be to begin with, they always stop fighting for the poor and end up indistinguishable from all the other parties. (You can read more about these betrayals in our pamphlet, *Don't Vote, Organise!*)

Some, indeed, will say that we should stand in elections, not because being in parliament will make a difference, but in order to get our message across, both during the campaign and afterwards through speeches and debates by our MPs. But this is no answer to the objections we have already raised.

Our pamphlet shows that many parties that ended up completely selling out the workers began by entering into parliament for just this reason! The best intentions are no protection against the nature and purpose of parliament.

And it is doubtful whether the goal of better propaganda would be attained even in the short term. Today we know that the capitalist media consistently joins the government in either ignoring our movements or characterising us as criminal lunatics. Would this change even if we demonstrated our support by electing a few MPs? Will they suddenly decide that reconnecting water and electricity has stopped being criminal? Or will they say that now that we have MPs we can clearly 'express our grievances through legitimate channels'? Are they not sure to encourage our MPs to see themselves as the true representatives of the movement, separate from the 'criminals' who in the face of capitalism are trying to take some control of their own lives? Like parliament, the media is there for the bosses and not for us. It will always serve their aims and not ours.

Elections are a lie spread by the capitalists to make us think we have some say in what happens to us. Our response to elections must aim at exposing this lie. Various suggestions have been made as to how we should do this. One possibility is that we contest the elections, but announce from the beginning that we will not be taking up seats; that a vote for the APF is not a vote to get a new gang of MPs, but simply a rejection of the ANC and its government, and an identification with the grassroots politics of the is a plausible approach that getting across the really make more clear some of the opposition to the ANC. But it we get few votes, we gain may increase pressure to take even to reverse our intentions way we will be pouring effort into getting votes when concentrating on more struggle. This could be a we are trying to win seats, to get someone into parliament what parliament and council useful, but is it worth it?



social movements. This might go some way to important points. It could growing working-class also carries dangers. If nothing; if we get many, it up seats in the future – or immediately. And either considerable time and we could be important aspects of major sacrifice, whether gain publicity, or just to or council to let us know are up to – which can be

The social movements must play to their strengths. And we have seen that our strengths are not in election campaigns, in parliament or in the media; these are the strengths of our enemies. Our strength is in grassroots organisation and direct action. We can reconnect electricity and water; we can destroy prepaid meters; we can sometimes defend our homes against the Red Ants and even recapture them once we are evicted. True, our movements are still comparatively small and weak, and even in these battles we are often defeated. But, there is far more scope for strengthening ourselves on our own terrain than on the terrain of the enemy. While parliaments have always been the place where workers and the poor are defeated and betrayed, direct action has frequently been their source of strength. In Russia, in Ukraine, in Spain and in many other countries, direct action has enabled workers and the poor to seize control of factories and farms, to drive out the bosses, to take control of the places where they lived, and to threaten and even topple the governments of the rich. Most recently in Argentina, workers who took to the streets, seized factories and set up community structures to run their own lives sufficiently terrified the bosses that four presidents had to resign in the space of a week, without the effort of voting against them. The road of direct action, of taking control of our own lives, is a long and hard one; but it offers far more promise than elections ever could.

Already the ANC is trying to trap us in connection with the next election. They have been saying that left groups who challenge GEAR are secretly laying the ground to set up their own parties and run for office. We can be sure that they will say a lot more of this, and will do their utmost to make it seem that we are into the same kind of political opportunism of which they themselves are guilty. But we should not allow ourselves to be trapped. There is a larger potential opposition than the voters of any existing party, or any that is likely to emerge; and that is the growing number of poor people who are so disillusioned that they will not vote at all. Of course disillusionment alone is not opposition or resistance; but even this negative rejection of the ANC is a major blow to the supposed party of national liberation, a blow we must emphasise; and it can become far more active and positive once people realise that *there is an alternative*. There is an alternative to elections, to parliament, to government, to the capitalist system that exploits and oppresses the vast majority. We can defeat these enemies and take control of our own lives, not by electing leaders to represent us, but through direct action and resistance on the ground. This is the message that the social movements should send out, clearly and unambiguously, in words and in actions, in response to the elections.

It is up to the workers and the poor themselves to decide how to handle the elections in the next couple of years. But we anarchists will make no secret of our views. It is our position that the social movements cannot gain by 'fighting elections' from inside, by having any part in the process of sending clowns to the parliamentary circus. We can only *fight elections* from outside, on the ground, relying on our own sources of strength, utterly rejecting these elections along with the whole oppressive system of which they are a part.



DON'T VOTE - ORGANISE!
DIRECT ACTION IS OUR WAY!
FORWARD TO WORKING CLASS REVOLUTION!

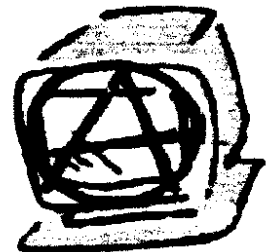
Issued by Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation

The Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Federation is an organisation of revolutionaries from the southern regions of Africa who identify with the communist tradition within Anarchism. The federation is organised around the principles of theoretical and tactical unity, collective responsibility and federalism. Our activities include study and theoretical development, anarchist agitation and propaganda, and participation within the class struggle.

As anarchist-communists, we struggle for a classless, stateless and non-hierarchical society. We envision an international confederation of directly democratic, self-managed communities and workplaces; a society where all markets, exchange value systems and divisions of labour have been abolished and the means of production, distribution and communication are socialised in order to allow for the satisfaction of the needs of everyone, adhering to the communist principle: *"From each according to ability, to each according to need."*

Southern African Anarchism Online
WWW.ZABALAZA.NET

*Links to local groups, education material,
email discussion lists, PDF leaflets for you to
distribute etc. etc.*



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