POLITICAL ORGANISING AND MOBILISING IN THE AGE OF THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

A Reflection on the Gauteng Young Communist League of South Africa

By Kgabo Morifi

What does the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) portend for the future of political organising and mobilising? As "a way of describing the blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological worlds...a fusion of advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of Things, 3D printing, genetic engineering, quantum computing, and other technologies..." (McGinnis, 2018), the 4IR is primarily concerned with the inchoate transformation of the production of goods and services, resulting from the application of a new wave of technological innovations. Definitions such as these cement the narrow idea that the 4IR is principally about industry, when in reality it is a revolution that goes beyond economic activity concerned with the manufacturing of goods and services.

The fusion of advances in technological innovations has implications for how we construct space, and – perhaps most importantly – how we organise society. While research on the implications of the 4IR on businesses is surging, there is little on its impact on political organisations, especially as it pertains to mobilisation and organising. Using the Gauteng Young Communist League of South Africa (YCLSA) as an example, this article fills this

void by demonstrating the ways in which political mobilisation and organisation have been impacted by the 4IR, and offers ideas on how political organisations can sustain their relevance in an age where traditional mobilising and organising methods are fast losing relevance.

The 4IR and South Africa

Inevitably, the 4IR has become the mantra of every policy initiative and political event in South Africa. So central is this idea to our current political and economic discourse that the President of the Republic, Cyril Ramaphosa, established a Presidential Commission to "identify relevant policies, strategies and action plans that will position South Africa as a competitive global player" in the context of the 4IR (The Presidency, 2019). While the Department of Communications, Telecommunications and Postal Services is the Coordinator of the Government's 4IR Programme, all national departments have – to varying degrees – incorporated it into their work. The South African Government has also dedicated resources towards Research and Development, with the 4IR at the centre of initiatives and businesses that are being funded and incentivised through mechanisms such as tax reduction.

But while the labour and trade union movements, as well as the political forces of the Left, recognise the inevitability and necessity of the march of technological advancement, they have posed various important questions about what the implications of the 4IR will be on labour and the working class if no intervention is made to protect the poor. In its statement at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 14th National Congress Central Committee, the South African Communist Party (SACP) conceded that new technologies have the possibility to "advance productivity, release humanity from repetitive toil, improve living standards, reduce the working day and provide innovative solutions to many developmental and social challenges" (2018). However, the statement also contented that – in the context of capitalist-driven profit maximisation – the competitive struggle for hegemony in the 4IR is likely to widen inequalities, reduce net employment, and relocate value-added production to the major areas of consumption in the developed world. Similar arguments have been made by various academics and political commentators

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Evidently, much of the support and criticism of the 4IR centres on industry and the economy. This narrow focus distorts the totality of the impact of 4IR on humanity. More than this, it does not reflect meaningfully on how the 4IR has impacted on the organisation of society, and how this organisation has significant implications for the present and future of South Africa and the global community. The Gauteng YCLSA provides an important glimpse into how advanced technologies have impacted on the nature of political mobilisation and organising, and how such changes challenge the complexity of political work in our evolving society.

Political Mobilisation and Organisation in the Context of the 4IR

Political organisation is a significant feature of South Africa's apartheid history and, just as significantly, its present reality. Our resistance and liberation struggles were anchored on the establishment of national liberation movements that mobilised masses of the oppressed and organised communities into a fighting force against repressive regimes. Because of the nature of South African society in the apartheid era, as well as the elementary stage of technological advancement at the time, political mobilisation depended largely on personal and physical recruitment and engagement. Strategies such as door-to-door campaigning, which are still being used today, were the primary methods of mobilisation. Organising was also wholly dependent on political activists making direct personal contact and using physical spaces as assembly points.

These mobilisation and organisation strategies entailed significant challenges. The apartheid government instituted various mechanisms to crack down on political organisers, including but not limited to the establishment of legislation

attacking the right to assembly, as well as the banning of political organisations. This effectively weakened the capacity of political organisations, but they nonetheless utilised creative means to mobilise people and mount resistance campaigns and initiatives. In post-apartheid South Africa, political organisations continue to utilise these traditional methods of mobilisation and organising. A specific example of this is the YCLSA.

Like all component structures of the mass democratic movement, the YCLSA has its roots in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid. Officially formed in 1922, the YCLSA was banned in 1950 (along with the SACP) under the Suppression of Communism Act. After more than five decades of inactivity following this ban, the YCLSA was relaunched in 2003 in Vanderbijlpark. At this 1st National Congress of its re-establishment, the organisation adopted a Constitution which would be amended several times. My reflections for this article are based on the latest constitutional amendment.

Section 6 of the YCLSA Constitution states that every member, irrespective of position, "must be organised into a branch, cell or other specific unit...and must participate in regular activities of the YCLSA". In terms of duties and responsibilities, members of the organisation are expected to "maintain close ties with the masses of young people, disseminate the views of the YCLSA and SACP among them, and consult with them when problems arise, keep the YCLSA informed of their views and demands and defend and revolutionise their legitimate interests". The Constitution also outlines a key responsibility towards effective organisation as participating in the "discussion of questions concerning YCLSA policies at YCLSA meetings and in YCLSA publications" (2013).

The Constitution of the YCLSA recognises that members of the organisation must keep close ties to the masses of young people, thereby making allowance for the possible use of advanced technologies in the administration of the organisation's political work. However, such a possibility is not concretised. In fact, the contention that YCLSA members must be organised into branches and other specific units is reflective of traditional political mobilisation and organising. Branches, which are basic units of political organisations, are constituted through organising groups of people within the same geographic locales. These are determined by administrative boundaries, which ironically largely continue to resemble the colonial and apartheid legacy of segregated human settlement. Herein lies the problem.

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The 4IR has rendered obsolete the definition of community as people living within the same place. The advance in information communication technologies (ICTs) has made communication easier and more flexible. The Internet of Things (IoT), a key feature of the 4IR, has further obliterated traditional geo-political boundaries. We live in an age of interrelated computing devices, mechanical and digital machines, objects, animals and people that are provided with unique identifiers (UIDs). We have the ability to transfer data over a network without requiring human-to-human or human-to-computer interaction, effectively allowing people who are continents apart to co-exist as if they were living in the same room.

In this evolved society, the idea of a branch must necessarily be revisited. Ronald Lamola, South African Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, has argued that the various engagements happening on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are calling for a change in the way that the ANC organises. Lamola has also pointed out that traditional ways of meeting are withering away, and that this necessitates the organisation devising innovative ways of capturing the imaginations of the people – particularly young people who are deeply invested in the arena of technology (2019).

Minister Lamola is correct. The implications for mobilisation and organising are particularly significant for an organisation like the YCLSA, which is devoted to the interests of the young people it seeks to mobilise. Research suggests

that the youth are the biggest consumers of technology, and therefore the use of technology should necessarily be a key strategy in mobilising this sector of society. Perhaps of greater importance, the use of advanced technology can also address one of the greatest dangers to South Africa's young democracy: young people's dissociation from voting.

A recent report by GroundUp investigated the reasons why nearly 10 million eligible voters (more than 6 million of whom are youth) did not cast their ballots at the 2019 general elections. Dissatisfaction with the lack of service delivery was at the top of the list for most, but the lack of technological flexibility was another contributing factor. One interviewee stated that he did not vote because he needed to be at work on voting day, but that he would have voted if technology had made allowance for him to do so.

The discussion around the use of advanced technology for political mobilisation in the context of voting is not new. Professor Bruce Watson, Head of the Department of Information Science at Stellenbosch University, has argued in the past that South Africa needs to introduce e-voting. Stellenbosch University is one of five universities that are part of the Centre for Artificial Intelligence Research, a research network which has investigated the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in elections. Professor Watson contends that AI could increasingly be used to identify voters at polls through facial recognition (Omarjee, 2019). Additionally, AI could also be used for data analytics to identify any strange patterns in voting outcomes at a voting station.

Big data could also play a crucial role in elections. The term 'big data' refers to analysing, systematically extracting information from, and dealing with data sets that are too large or complex for traditional data-processing application software. Predictive analytics could aid us in the development of models that could encourage political engagement amongst people who would otherwise not participate in political processes, thereby strengthening and safeguarding our democratic aspirations and future.

However, as cautioned by Mashupye Maserumule – Professor of Public Affairs at the Tshwane University of Technology – technology as a tool can optimise voting experience, but should not be conflated with what really makes people vote. Maserumule argues that "the reason to vote is a function of consciousness" (2019). In other words, galvanizing youth to vote should entail mapping their social reality. Messaging should attract young people, and technology should be used to communicate political messages. Technology from this point of view can be seen as a means, not an end. This should not be misconstrued as underplaying the role of technology in politics, but rather as an attempt to underscore its significance in influencing political organising and mobilisation. As pointed out earlier, the context for this reflection is the YCLSA in Gauteng, based on my experience as its provincial secretary.

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Why should Gauteng's YCLSA be at the forefront of using technology for political organisation and mobilisation?

Gauteng is the nerve centre of South Africa's economy – contributing to a third of the country's economic output in 2018. According to Stats SA, the province's economy is roughly the same size as that of Morocco, if we use nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures as a comparison. If Gauteng were to become its own independent state, it would have the seventh biggest economy on the continent – surpassing regional economic powerhouses such as Kenya and Tanzania. Gauteng's income per capita surpasses that of Nigeria, Africa's biggest economy and most populous country (Stats SA, 2019). Gauteng's economy, however, has transitioned from being industry-based to being knowledge-based (as can be said for the rest of South Africa), and therefore cannot be understood without an appreciation of technology and its evolution.

The birth of Gauteng's industrial economy can be traced back to the Minerals Revolution, specifically the discovery of gold at the

Witwatersrand ore fields that straddle the former Transvaal and Orange Free State provinces. The emergence of industry-scale mining that emerged from this revolution not only resulted in significant demographic shifts owing to migrant labour, but also to the re-organisation of space. It can be correctly argued that the Minerals Revolution set parameters for the establishment of colonial- and apartheid-era cities in Gauteng, which gave birth to the post-apartheid cities in which we negotiate our existence today. But another reality of this revolution is that it introduced new technologies that would ultimately change the nature of the economy and land use.

There are two critical points arising from this brief history. Firstly, the Minerals Revolution led to industry-scale mining that necessitated the use of migrant labour. The migrant labour system was the birth of urbanisation in Gauteng as we know it today. The YCLSA, an organisation that is internationalist in orientation, has the unique opportunity of recruiting in a province that is cosmopolitan, with a demographic make-up that is reflective of a long history of migration. The use of technology can tap into this critical human resource. But such technology must, first and foremost, be cemented as an alternative to traditional forms of mobilising.

Secondly, it is important to note that the development of infrastructure was critical to the rapid development of the Gauteng economy – a development that continues today. The South African economy has transitioned to being knowledge-based, with the economies of urbanised provinces such as Gauteng being characterised as post-productivist. A post-productivist economy is characterised to a great degree by a decline in the primary sector and a growth in the quaternary sector, comprised of industries such as e-commerce, research and development, media, information technology, financial planning and design. This shift in the economy has greatly impacted the construction of space in Gauteng. The middle-class population that works in the quaternary sector has unique demands in terms of housing, transport and other services. The growth in security in the city's residential areas is reflective of this.

In a province where traditional methods of political mobilisation, such as door-to-door canvassing, are being undermined by security estates and gentrified neighbourhoods, technology is the only option for mobilisation and organising. Our work as organisers in the YCLSA has indicated that in a province like Gauteng, so advanced in its economy and its technologies, political mobilisation must evolve if the organisation is to maintain relevance. More innovative use of technologies – including but not limited to information technologies, big data and IoT – must be explored, or we run the risk of not just being left behind by the young people we seek to mobilise, but being rendered an extraneous organisation. We are grappling with this reality with the full awareness that technology is a means to optimise political processes. However, we must also bear in mind that it cannot be used to abdicate our political responsibility to map social realities and galvanize young people into political participation. ■

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