

# **Who is the South African Middle Class?**

## **Introduction**

There certainly is no constant definition of what middle class is and who constitute that social stratum in society. In the predominant liberal ideological sphere, the concept and phenomenon of middle class is generally understood to refer to those people who have a degree of economic independence, but not a great deal of social influence or power. Within this framework, there are many factors that are definitive of the middle class of a society, such as money, behaviour and heredity. In some countries, it is predominantly money that determines an individual's position in the social hierarchy. In others, other social factors may have as strong an influence. Such factors include education, professional or employment status, home ownership, or culture.

In Marxism-Leninism, the middle class is understood as that social stratum in society that does not own the means of production and although selling labour for survival, is not characterised by the same deprivation levels as the working class. In the class struggle, the middle class plays a vacillating role, neither loyal to the working class, nor committed to the bourgeoisie. Livelihood and material existence determines consciousness, and the middle class in society is that section that does not experience the most brutal of class exploitation, and therefore unreliable in a class struggle.

“The lower middle-class,” in Marx’s words, “has no special class interests. Its liberation does not entail a break with the system of private property. Being unfitted for an independent part in the class struggle, it considers every decisive class struggle a blow at the community. The conditions of his own personal freedom, which do not entail a departure from the system of private property, are, in the eyes of the member of the lower middle-class, those under which the whole of society can be saved.”

Now with these broad conceptualisations on what a middle is and could be, the below exercise characterises and defines the nature and character of the South African middle class, and explore what could be its possible cooperation with the working class for a concerted working class struggle in South Africa led by the working class Vanguard in South Africa. For this purpose, characterisation of the SA middle class should be through levels of income and observation of the broad political currents that sweep, influence and thereof characterise strata within specific income levels.

## **Marxism and the Middle Class**

In Marxism-Leninism, the concept of class is understood in accordance to a social stratum’s relationship to the predominant means of production. Essentially, Marxism-Leninism conceives that there are two contradictory and conflicting

classes in modes of productions that espouse private ownership of production means, i.e. “freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, [bourgeoisie and proletariat] [stand] in constant opposition to one another” (Communist Manifesto, 1848—emphasis added).

The Communist Manifesto nevertheless acknowledges that in the historical development of society, “guild-masters were pushed aside by the manufacturing middle class...the place of manufacture was taken by the giant, MODERN INDUSTRY; the place of the industrial middle class by industrial millionaires, the leaders of the whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois” (Communist Manifesto, 1848). Locating in middle class in a the development of the proletariat, the Manifesto says “The lower strata of the middle class—the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants -- all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus, the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population”, (Communist Manifesto, 1848).

The Manifesto asserts that “Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a genuinely revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product. The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay, more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history. If, by chance, they are revolutionary, they are only so in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat; they thus defend not their present, but their future interests; they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat” (Communist Manifesto, 1848).

In the Preface to the 1888 Preface to the English Edition of the Communist Manifesto, Engels observes that in England and France “socialism was a middle class movement, communism a working-class movement. Socialism was, on the Continent (Europe) at least, “respectable”; communism was the very opposite”, (Communist Manifesto Preface to the English Edition, 1888). Overall and as a means to avoid misdirecting the intentions of this exercise, the Communist Manifesto asserted that in the advanced countries, the following should be applicable:

- ★ Abolition of property in land and application of all rents of land to public purposes.
- ★ A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.

- ★ Abolition of all rights of inheritance.
- ★ Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.
- ★ Centralization of credit in the banks of the state, by means of a national bank with state capital and an exclusive monopoly.
- ★ Centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state.
- ★ Extension of factories and instruments of production owned by the state; the bringing into cultivation of waste lands, and the improvement of the soil generally in accordance with a common plan.
- ★ Equal obligation of all to work. Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture.
- ★ Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equable distribution of the populace over the country.
- ★ Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, etc

These 10 Communist Manifesto concrete assertions are particularly emphasised since this exercise believes that nothing more could be relevant in present conjecture of South African revolution as a immediate programme to consolidate the socialist struggles. Notably, Bela Kun observes in his discussion of '*Marx and the Middle class*' that "The lower middle-class is not fit to wield power, and a long government by it is unthinkable. This, first and foremost, for economic reasons: the small shopkeeper is the debtor of the great capitalist, and must remain in dependence on him as long as there exists the system of credit — which cannot be destroyed while the domination of private property continues" (Kun, 1918).

### **The South African Middle Class**

Various perceptions exist on who constitute the South African middle class, and this is regularly used to explain certain issues, and intended at achieving certain ideological and political positions. As an introduction to who the SA middle class could be, we present various quotes on the middle class"

The ***SouthAfrica.info*** website says:

"South Africa's black middle class has grown by 30% in just over a year, with their numbers increasing from 2-million to 2.6-million and their collective spending power rising from R130-billion to R180-billion" (*SouthAfrica.info*, May 2007).

The ***Mail & Guardian*** says:

“Sales of new cars in South Africa have reached all-time highs, boosted by an emerging black middle class, once under apartheid's thumb and now playing an increasingly important role in the economy” (*Mail & Guardian*, 15 January 2006).

The ***People's Daily Online*** says:

“Jane Tempest, the head of the research, said growing inequality was in part an indication of the growth of the black middle class, which was a positive indicator...Only in recent years the black middle class, defined in South Africa as people who earn at least 154,000 rand (about 25,000 U.S. dollars) per year, has grown rapidly thanks mainly to the government's black empowerment policies intended to increase black participation in the mainstream economy” (*People's Daily Online*, 05 April 2006).

The ***Financial News*** says:

“House price growth in this new democracy of 44m people has slowed from the 35.1 per cent gain it showed in late 2004, but a growing black middle class, boosted by economic liberalisation, affirmative action employment policies and an active redistribution of wealth is driving growth as never before” (*Financial News*, May 22, 2005).

The ***SouthAfrica.info*** website says:

Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka has urged South Africa's black middle class to reinvest in their communities, to create the skills needed for the country to achieve the government's target of 6% economic growth, (*SouthAfrica.info*, 2005).

The ***Oxford Business Group*** says:

“The emergence of a black middle class, buoyant and sustained macroeconomic performance, and low interest rates, have led to strong growth in the construction and real estate sectors”... and further asserts that “South Africa's emerging black middle class is the propelling the [RETAIL] industry's growth” (*Oxford Business Group*, Emerging SA 2006).

The ***Business Day*** quoted the National Union of Mineworkers as having said:

“We have to reclaim the ANC from the black middle class and restore it to the working masses,” (*Business Day*, 25 May 2007).

In 2005, American Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) ***Foreign Correspondent*** reported:

“Twelve years after the white rule era of apartheid, South Africa's educated blacks are pushing ahead. It's estimated that one hundred thousand a year are entering the middle class” (*Foreign Correspondent*, 30 May 2005).

## South African Middle Class in Context

The SACP's *Path to Power* observed in Chapter 3 (Colonialism of a Special Type):

“Among the oppressed black majority of our country there is a fairly small but growing and relatively significant range of middle strata, made up of a commercial petty bourgeoisie, and various professional categories. These middle strata suffer, with their fellow black, under the brutal and humiliating system of colonialism. The majority of these middle strata, in terms of their living conditions, their social origin and their political aspirations are closely linked to the oppressed black proletariat. Despite the regime's attempts to woo these black middle strata, hoping to transform them into a buffer between the masses and the white colonial bloc, the overwhelming majority have rejected these ploys. Indeed, the active participation of black middle strata within the national democratic movement has been an important feature of our revolutionary struggle. This is not to say that there are no other, contradictory tendencies among sections of the black middle strata. The apartheid regime has not abandoned its attempts to win them over, and their continued allegiance to the people's cause requires active and ongoing work”.

Chapter 4 of the SACP's *Path to Power* emphasised:

The South African Communist Party is the party of the working class, the disciplined and advanced class which has no property stakes in present day South Africa and has been the core and inspiration of other classes in every struggle of our time. The working class seeks a close alliance with the rural people, and with the urban middle classes and intellectuals in the national democratic revolution. Only under its leadership can the full aims of the revolution be achieved. It is to enable the working class to fulfill this historic mission that the workers have founded and built their own political party, the South African Communist Party.

The African Communist No 149 - Second Quarter 1998, published an article titled “*A socialist approach to the consolidation and deepening of the National Democratic Revolution*” and it observed”

“Within the calculations of this project, the old and emerging bourgeois factions will not (and could not) go it alone. The new bloc will seek to present its interests as those of a broader range of middle strata, especially the rapidly forming new black middle strata - professionals, private and parastatal managers, middle and senior level civil servants. "Modernising", "normalising", "globalising", "black economic empowerment" and plain self-enrichment will be among the major themes around which this bloc will attempt to consolidate itself. Socialism, more substantial transformation, and the Freedom Charter are viewed as "baggage from the past". Real issues, like gender oppression, are picked up within this project, but are then largely confined to elite concerns and resolutions, such as ensuring that a quota of women are represented within the emerging public and private sector elite”.

