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# F\*#@ IT

## WE NEED AND DESERVE BETTER

by Shawn Hattingh

South Africa's recent local government elections were held in a setting that could have come out of the dystopian television series, *Squid Game*. In the fictional *Squid Game*, deep poverty and depravation drives people to partake in lethal games to amuse the rich. Indeed, in South Africa the rich are amused in secured estates built and cleaned by workers driven by deprivation to do so, with poverty for a majority being all too real.

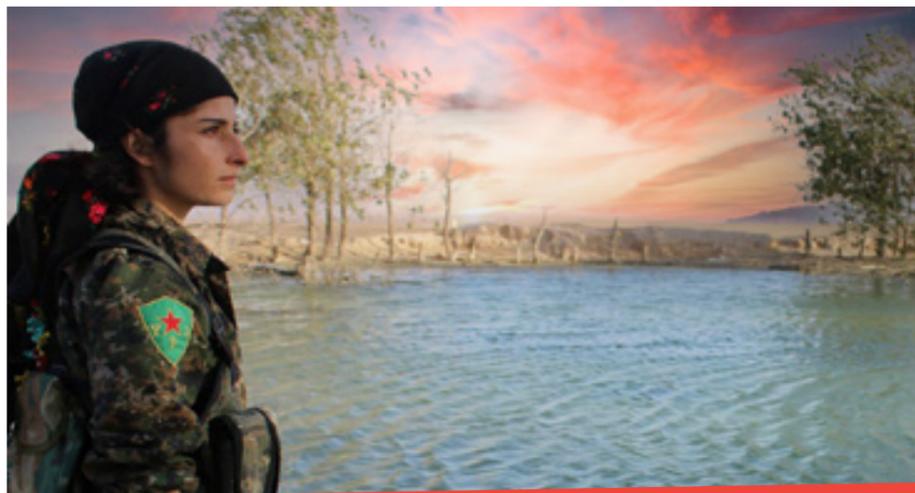
The local government elections took place in a context where the infrastructure in most communities is breaking down or broken, where gender-based violence is the highest in the world outside of a warzone, where unemployment has reached 46%, where political assassinations over posts are common, where 45% of households rely on social grants for income, where spatial apartheid still exists, and where 23% of people face hunger on a regular basis. In other words, the local government elections took place in a setting in which society itself is fracturing and fraying.

Perhaps in such conditions it should not be a surprise that the African National Congress (ANC) received less than 50% of the votes cast. For 27 years the ANC has failed to end the legacy of apartheid and indeed, through adopting neoliberal capitalism – and accompanying privatisation, outsourcing, tendering and corruption - it has worsened the material conditions of millions of working class people. The anger some people were feeling towards the ANC was palpable when President Cyril Ramaphosa was repeatedly confronted on the campaign trail by communities demanding crumbling services be fixed. Yet all the ANC could offer in the election was more of the same – a capitalist and state system that has benefitted the ruling class and whose only real achievement has been to get a few Black Economic Empowerment faces and black politicians and bureaucrats into the ruling class at the expense of the majority of people.

It is also unsurprising that there was an explosion of political parties and independent candidates contesting the elections as people grasped for solutions for the multiple crises the country faces. This was highlighted by the fact that there were 325 parties and 1,500 independents contesting across the country. Worryingly, most of these smaller parties that have mushroomed from the dung heap that is electoral politics offered right-wing 'solutions', including xenophobia.

Reactionary politics based on hate, however, was not only confined to small parties. The bigger ones too embraced retrogressive campaigns. For example, the Democratic Alliance and Freedom Front Plus relied on their usual *swart gewaar* propaganda to try cobble votes together from the white, 'coloured' and Indian communities; while the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) offered up a form of authoritarianism with a strong flavour of anti-white and anti-Indian rhetoric with absolutely zero said about class.

It is little wonder, therefore, that the majority of people who were eligible to vote did not bother to do so. People have simply had enough of the lies spewed by politicians and the reality that the state itself has become a site of accumulation for politicians, even at a local level through corruption and nepotism. Some people, although a minority still, have started to realise that there is a deep problem with the state system itself, and have



A YPJ soldier next to a large reservoir in Northern Syria. Photograph courtesy of Wikipedia.

concluded that it mainly serves the interest of the rich and politicians.

Indeed, states are not neutral. Their purpose, since the first one was founded 5000 years ago, was and is to ensure and carry out the rule of an elite minority. This is what they were and are designed to do, hence their hierarchical structure. People can and do win rights through struggle, but as soon as struggle stops, states roll back those gains. Under capitalism, states ultimately protect capitalists and ensure that the system can

function so profits can be made and taxes paid – taxes that politicians derive wealth from. This is the nature of all states - even the Soviet Union protected the interests of elite bureaucrats and politicians and was a form of state capitalism; not a workers' or socialist paradise.

In a state system, orders come from

above and there is a chain of command. In South Africa, that has had dire consequences at a very local level. Under the national state's neoliberal policies – set by a handful of politicians, bureaucrats and consultants from the private sector – which includes reducing inter-governmental funding, local governments are forced to implement neoliberalism via cost recovery, self-generating income, outsourcing and tendering. This is so regardless of the party controlling the municipality. In turn, councillors of all stripes have to follow the logic of neoliberalism due to the hierarchical nature of the state – compared to National Ministers, they have little power in the pyramid. Many councillors, however, follow the dictates from above willingly, as the tenders and outsourcing linked to neoliberalism offer business opportunities for friends and family members, along with kick-backs. People are not blind to this, and are fed up, with the result that many more people in South Africa are electing not to vote.

The working class deserves better than what was served up in the recent local government elections. An alternative to the corrupt and decaying carcass that is the state system, and the forked-tongued political parties that contest to control it, is needed. In fact, in different parts of the world, more and more people are slowly beginning to experiment with egalitarian systems of direct democracy beyond capitalism, the state and even political parties. It is in this direction that hope lies for the working class in South Africa.

One of the most interesting and comprehensive experiments of people building self-governing structures that seek to overcome capitalism, patriarchy and the state is the Rojava Revolution in North East Syria. In Rojava 4.5 million people have been building a system of direct democracy (that is not a nation state) since an uprising that toppled the Syrian state in the area in 2012. In Rojava, power is held at a street-level. At this level, between 20 and 100 households form a commune to run the economy, undertake education, further women's liberation, organise basic governance and meet people's material needs locally. In the commune, everyone has a right to speak and vote with decisions being made through direct democracy.

Through mandated and recallable delegates these communes are confederated into neighbourhood assemblies, city councils, canton councils and a Rojava-wide council. Indeed, the movement that has been created in Rojava, while not perfect and still evolving, shows that a different form of self-governance can be built and can be used to build towards egalitarianism. It is possible to have a system where a majority of people hold and exercise power. This shows that states and even capitalism are not inevitable nor desirable.

In South Africa, we already have community movements and worker formations that offer some hope for an alternative to the currently dominant hollow state and political party system. We also have experience of building people's power during the anti-apartheid struggle, in which structures were created to run communities based on self-governance in the form of street committees. We need to take inspiration from such past struggles, develop true alternatives beyond electoral politics, and build our organisations into a transformative mass movement that creates structures of working class power and self-governance outside of the state - and that one day could even replace the state. The fact that most people did not vote shows that space is opening up for such a project. In fact, it appears to be the only project that can offer hope, and it should not be lost to reactionary ideas. The challenge is to take the space and begin the hard task of building a progressive alternative – this is what we need and deserve.

Here, there is the possibility of a future in which much of the old ideological, organisational and discursive baggage can be offloaded, in which new spaces for critical thinking and debate can be created, in which progressive and personal as well as collective social and moral values and principles can be committed to, and in which the basics of inclusive and grounded organisational forms and struggles can take centre stage.

**"...in different parts of the world, more and more people are slowly beginning to experiment with egalitarian systems of direct democracy beyond capitalism, the state and even political parties. It is in this direction that hope lies for the working class in South Africa."**

## EDITORIAL

In the final issue of *Workers World News* for 2021, we reflect on important events and struggles that have taken place this past year.

In the Lead Article, Shawn Hattingh takes a critical look at the recent local government elections in South Africa, and the problematic nature of the capitalist state system more broadly. He argues that instead of corrupt and reactionary political party 'leadership', working class movements deserve and must fight for alternative and truly democratic forms of self-government. In *Gender News*, Jeremy Daphne and Lorena Carrasco Núñez write about the ongoing popular struggle in Chile and the decisive role of the feminist movement in ushering in a new Constitutional Assembly and disrupting the status quo.

This issue contains the final article in our Educational Series on worker cooperatives. Having explored the value of worker cooperatives as spaces for building and experimenting with anti-capitalist principles and practices, and having looked at key international examples, Leila Khan turns to the history of, and possibilities for, cooperative worker organising in the South African context. Worker organising is also the focus in the International News article by Mthetho Xali, who highlights the importance of the recent strike wave that swept across the United States. He argues that the collective actions undertaken by workers represent a rise in worker confidence to raise demands which improve their conditions and the conditions of the broader public, as well as demands which push unions to be more accountable and democratic.

Two articles in this issue are dedicated to the current uprising in Swaziland, as our comrades there have entered the second wave of their struggle for a democratic dispensation. The *My Struggle* section contains a statement by the Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF), which outlines their demands and calls for solidarity. In the Guest Article, Venitia Govender foregrounds the defiance of young people in Swaziland who have played a key leadership role while facing harsh repression under King Mswati III's rule. Accompanying this article is an artwork by SUDF member Abigail Jele, created during the ILRIG 2021 Political School.

The Cultural Page features more creative work produced during this year's Political School - three poems written by Jameelah Davids from *Reclaim The City*. Also on this page, we introduce the forthcoming ILRIG 2022 calendar, containing histories of women's resistance on the African continent as well as artworks produced by women printmakers from Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg. This issue's pull-out poster, a linocut print by Hlavutelo Ngobeni, is one of the artworks that will be in the calendar. In this artwork, she creatively interprets the 1959 beerhall boycotts in South Africa, and the brave women who led this attack on the apartheid regime.

It is vital that we learn from historical and contemporary progressive struggles, in South Africa and all over the world, in order to build strong worker and community movements. This is particularly necessary and urgent as another year marked by rising poverty, inequality, and violence in the context of capitalism and COVID-19 comes to a close.

**Pull-out poster**

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Illustration by Hlavutelo Ngobeni  
Instagram: @hlavu\_ngobeni\_art

**GENDER NEWS** by Jeremy Daphne and Lorena Carrasco Núñez

# A NEW CHILE IN THE MAKING AND THE RISE OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL LEFT



Elisa Loncon, an indigenous Mapuche activist elected as President of Chile's Constitutional Assembly. Photograph courtesy of Twitter/@ElisaLoncon.

**In October 2019, Chileans in their millions rose up against the neoliberal system first instituted by Augusto Pinochet many decades previously.**

A deep groundswell of history in the making ran through Chile. Not COVID-19, not the lock downs, and not even the strenuous repression by the Piñera government and the broad right could not stop this.

As a result of the uprising, a referendum was held in October 2020 to decide on a new constitution and the mechanism to formulate it. This resulted in a resounding 79% yes vote and the election of a new Constitutional Assembly.

Following this development, Chileans voted in May 2021 for a 155-seat Constitutional Assembly to forge the new constitution, along with electing governors, mayors and councillors across the country – with dramatic outcomes!

## A political earthquake

The now often-used description of the electoral outcomes as a 'political earthquake' is apt. It constituted a fundamental rejection of the political and business elite, along with other mainstream organisations both to the left and right. It was also a decisive vote against the neoliberal policies and practices triggered by the Pinochet regime fifty years ago. Importantly, the previously dominant right-wing coalition fell far short of attaining the one third representation in the Constitutional Assembly, which would have enabled them to veto decisions.

In a new and important development, independents obtained 48 seats, constituting almost one third (31%) of assembly seats. Leftist parties obtained 28 seats and indigenous peoples were reserved 17 seats. This means that two left coalitions, the independents and the Apruebo Dignidad, stand to dominate the Assembly.

This dramatic trend was also manifested in the elections for governors, mayors and councillors, changing the face of Chile virtually overnight! Another important feature is the fact that gender parity for the constitutional assembly was achieved by the feminist movement, a first in the world for this provision. A significant number of representatives to the constitutional assembly have committed themselves to strive for a feminist constitution. This stands to have far-reaching effects in the constitution-making process which is expected to conclude in July 2022. In addition, indigenous peoples will now for the first time have a strong voice in writing the country's new constitution.

## A victory for the non-traditional left and anti-neoliberalism

This was a victory for the independents and their supporters that now make up the non-traditional left in Chile, along with the left-orientated political parties. This constituency has a number of important characteristics that make the election profoundly important, not only for Chile, but more broadly.

Firstly, neoliberalism and its impacts was the key issue focused on across the various groupings and parties, with anti-neoliberal perspectives being clearly expressed. In fact, the battle lines were drawn around this issue. Secondly, a strong feminist perspective prevails. This constituency is also generally young. It thus can be said that the election results were a victory for the feminist movement, for anti-neoliberalism and for the youth.

Candidates from this left constituency also campaigned on issues, spoke a language and expressed sentiments that resonated with voters. Candidates were respected for having a record of being on the streets interacting on a continuous basis. Linked to this, people and in particular the youth, did not vote along traditional lines, rather supporting candidates that appealed to their direct interests and their vision of a new society.

The independents consist of a diversity of people from all walks of life who came together as activists in the uprising. The advent of the independents signals a profound disillusionment with the mainstream in all its forms, including political parties.

The elite bubble is under severe challenge!

## A victory as well for left parties

In addition to the right, another casualty of the elections were the mainstream opposition parties, who lost significant support. The notable exception was the Frente Amplio, a coalition of left-orientated parties coming from the student uprisings over the past decade. The other political party on the left that received support is the Chilean Communist Party. In the view of an activist lawyer from central Santiago, the Frente Amplio and the Communist Party enjoyed support due to fielding young, dynamic candidates who connected to people on the street.

## Re-energising and re-imaging the left

As can be seen, this development has dramatically brought to centre stage a new left formation, constituting what has been termed the 'non-traditional left' and some established left political parties.

This stands to significantly energise and provide direction for the broad left in Chile, not forgetting the challenges ahead, while it will be the cause for much introspection for some. This includes the trade union movement, whose key representatives in the Unidad Social, a trade union / civil society coalition, were not elected. There is no doubt that many questions can be raised in this regard, but a tectonic political shift has happened, with the ascendancy of a new left vision.

Chileans now go to the polls for national elections on 21 November 2021. It is likely that a new left president will gain power. These left and progressive forces have proclaimed Gabriel Boric from Frente Amplio as their candidate. If successful, he will make an important contribution to the constitutional change process. This process will culminate in a referendum to decide on its adoption. A sea of change has happened in Chile and the future looks promising for the majority of Chileans!

# WORKER COOPERATIVES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Part 1 of this educational series argued that worker cooperatives, despite their pitfalls and limitations, can be important vehicles for defending struggles and putting progressive principles into practice. Part 2 demonstrated this point by highlighting some examples of democratic worker occupations and cooperatives from around the world. In this article, the final in this series, we turn to worker cooperatives in the South African context, and their particular history, challenges, and potential role in advancing labour organising.

## South African experiments in worker control

In the 1980s, worker cooperatives were increasingly debated and experimented with in the South African labour movement. This took place against the backdrop of economic recession, restructuring, widespread worker dismissals, and the emergence of nearby cooperative movements in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. South Africa has many interesting historical and contemporary examples of worker self-organisation – below are just four of them.

### The Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (1985)

In 1985, 970 striking workers belonging to the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) were abruptly dismissed by BTR Sarmcol in Howick. In order to support the dismissed workers who continued to demonstrate against Sarmcol, MAWU initiated the formation of the Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (SAWCO). SAWCO's primary projects were vegetable farming and screenprinting political t-shirts. Although SAWCO was only able to employ a small number of the workers, it provided critical support to the communities impacted by the dismissals, including through food parcels, a community health program, and the use of posters and theatre to build international solidarity with the striking workers. SAWCO provided a model for using worker cooperatives as a defensive strategy that inspired many similar initiatives, including the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) Co-op Programme.

### Zenzeleni Clothing (1989)

After the Frame Group of textile manufacturers in Durban announced in 1988 that a large number of workers would be retrenched, the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU) entered into negotiations with the company to safeguard jobs. SACTWU successfully ensured commitment from the Frame Group to provide the start-up capital so that the retrenched workers could establish their own clothing factory. The workers formed a cooperative in 1989 under the name Zenzeleni, meaning 'do it yourself' in isiZulu. Workers received training and began to participate in decisions about their company and their working conditions. Harsh disciplinary measures such as forfeiture of pay were done away with, resulting in lower absentee rates than other factories.

Zenzeleni Clothing is still in existence 30 years later. Over this period, it has faced many difficulties, including the confiscation of political t-shirts by apartheid police, the struggle to compete with cheap imports, and its inability to pay its workers a living wage. Nevertheless, it played a critical role in saving the jobs of hundreds of workers and, having secured large contracts to produce workwear, has managed to avoid retrenchments and continue production.

### The Sihlahla Muri recycling worker cooperative (2009)

In 2009, workers at the Split Rock waste collection and recycling plant in Johannesburg took over the company after its liquidation through a buyout facilitated by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). The workers formed Sihlahla Muri after taking the decision to run their company as a worker cooperative. NUMSA has provided significant support, financial and otherwise, to this worker initiative. This has included providing office space, insuring the cooperative's assets, training the workers in how to run a cooperative, assisting

the workers to develop a business plan, and committing to provide NUMSA's recyclable waste in the city to Sihlahla Muri. While Sihlahla Muri only employs a few workers, it is an important example of how trade unions can defend workers from job losses, and provide education and resources to support alternative forms of worker organising.

### The Mine Line/TAP Engineering factory occupation (2010)

In August 2010, three workers were killed in a boiler machine explosion at the Mine Line/TAP Engineering factory in Krugersdorp. This tragedy revealed that the factory owner had not been contributing to the workers' pension funds and other benefits. To make matters worse, the owner then filed for bankruptcy after stealing millions from the company and without taking responsibility for the workers' deaths. The workers occupied their factory in October 2010, in an attempt to save their jobs and prevent the machinery and other assets being removed by liquidators. They demanded that the state provide the workers with capital and transfer ownership of the company to the workers, so that they could form a worker cooperative and continue production.

The workers, who were members of the Metal and Electrical Workers' Union of South Africa (MEWUSA), stayed at the factory in shifts and mobilised public support, resulting in the formation of a solidarity committee made up of workers, labour and community organisations, NGOs and academics. The workers received training on cooperative principles, assistance in registering as a worker cooperative, and collectively discussed how they would share and invest their surplus. Unfortunately, the workers had to end their occupation in December 2010 due to a lack of resources and limited support from MEWUSA. Despite this outcome, the Mine Line/TAP factory occupation was a radical attempt by workers to assert their power and demand control of their labour and workplace, in a situation in which they had few other options for redress. If workplace occupations and cooperatives are to become a feature of the labour organising landscape in South Africa, as they have in other countries which have faced widespread factory closures and worker dismissals, more support and solidarity will be required, particularly from trade unions.

### The state of worker cooperatives in South Africa

In post-apartheid South Africa, cooperatives have received increasing attention from government, resulting in an enabling legislative and policy framework and the proliferation of new worker cooperatives. At the same time, worker cooperatives have received very little state support or protection, and have largely been expected to compete in harsh market conditions from the get-go. Where worker cooperatives do receive direct and continuous support from the state, as is the case with local-government initiated worker cooperative projects, this creates limitations on their ability to organise and take decisions autonomously. Many worker cooperatives have been formed in line with the ANC's Black Economic Empowerment policy, benefiting those with political connections rather than workers wishing to practice democratic self-management and production on their own terms. With the exception of NUMSA and SACTWU, worker cooperatives seem to be largely excluded from the agenda of trade unions, even as a defensive strategy.

The reality is that most worker cooperatives are only able to employ small numbers of workers at low wages, and are forced to focus on survival as opposed to building progressive and democratic

workplaces. The lack of capital, support, skills and experience in self-management mean that South African worker cooperatives face many of the same challenges as worker cooperatives in the rest of the world. However, as has been argued in this series, worker cooperatives can provide immediate relief to workers facing unemployment and sustain strike actions. When successful, worker cooperatives build the confidence and capacity of workers, and develop more democratic and progressive organisations.

### Is there a role for worker cooperatives in South African labour struggles?

While worker cooperatives are unable to solve South Africa's mass unemployment and development challenges, they should be more seriously considered by progressive organisations and trade unions as an organising tool. Worker cooperatives can be important mechanisms to organise casual and informal workers, as well as the unemployed. Successful worker cooperatives can offer solutions to resource problems faced by movements, and therefore can contribute to more independent and sustainable organisations. Crucially, worker cooperatives can function as a training ground to build worker self-organisation and experience in participatory democracy, and can demonstrate that another world is possible.

Worker cooperatives, particularly those initiated through workplace occupations, represent alternative and powerful ways for workers to fight back against factory closures and mistreatment by capitalist bosses. This is especially so in the context of COVID-19 and rising unemployment and inequality in South Africa. Trade unions should take bolder steps to defend, resource, and facilitate such actions and initiatives, without infringing on worker independence. If workers are supported to successfully take over their workplaces and build cooperatively-run organisations, the lessons and impacts would only strengthen the labour movement's ability to defend itself, mobilise workers, and dismantle the capitalist system.



**SUPPORT OUR STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID!**

**Support our fight against BTR Union-busting in South Africa!**

We, 1000 workers employed by top British Multinational BTR at the SARMCOL plant in South Africa, went on strike in May 1985. What we wanted was recognition for our union MAWU. Instead we were all sacked. Since then we have kept up our organisation. We have organised solidarity strikes in the region, a general stay at home strike in the area, a consumer boycott, a shareholder protest, demonstrations, pickets etc. etc. We have taken BTR to court. We want our jobs back. We will not give in. BTR MUST NEGOTIATE OR GET OUT OF SOUTH AFRICA!

Our resistance has been met by repression. BTR is trying to starve us into submission. They call the police to break up our pickets. Government-backed vigilantes have terrorised our community, murdering many of our members and leaders, assaulting many others. But we are determined to continue.

BUT... in our rural area there are no jobs. Just to stay alive is a struggle. So we have organized ourselves into co-ops called SAWCO to provide food, health services, and to promote solidarity. One of our co-ops makes T-shirts carrying the logos of our labour and community organisations. You can help us if you...

**BUY and WEAR a SAWCO T-SHIRT**

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Price: \_\_\_\_\_

Logos as shown and many others in various colours and sizes.

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# THE UNITED STATES OCTOBER STRIKES

In October 2021, workers in the US organised several strikes that affected a range of sectors, from healthcare to construction, carpentry to coal mining, media to communications, snack foods and cereal manufacturing. In total, 100,000 workers voted to go on a strike action.

24 000 nurses and other employees at the Kaiser Permanente hospitals in California voted to strike alongside 10 000 Kaiser employed workers in Oregon. This was in response to a new contract that offered an inadequate 1% pay rise for existing staff, and imposed a cut of between 26 and 39% for new hires. In Buffalo, New York, 2 500 nurses and hospital staff employed by the Mercy Hospital went on strike in response to staff shortages, low wages, and attacks on pensions.

In Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Colorado, and Georgia, 10 000 workers at John Deere, a manufacturer of farming equipment, embarked on a strike on 14 October. John Deere workers rejected the ending of the moratorium on plant closures, the undermining of pension terms for newly employed workers, as well as company's offer that did not keep up with price increases. John Deere workers remain on strike after they rejected the second tentative agreement on 2 November.

1 400 cereal workers at Kellogg's four separate plants in Nebraska, Michigan, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania embarked on a strike on 5 October, in

response to, Kellogg's plans to cut 212 jobs in its Battle Creek, Michigan plant, the removal of cost-of-living provisions, the attacking of holiday pay, and the introduction of a two-tier pay and benefits system.

60 000 workers in the US film and television industry were prepared to go on strike but it was called off at the last minute on 18 October, following an agreement that was reached between the International

**"Workers are collectively standing up to change their situation and inspiring other workers through their actions."**

Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and the media bosses. However, many grassroots activists were not happy with the agreement and argued that a better deal could have been made if they proceeded with the strike.

These strikes illustrate a rise in confidence on the part of workers seeking to change their conditions of work. Kaiser Permanente workers are demanding a 4% raise for the next three years and the hiring of more nurses to address staffing shortages. They are also demanding equal pay for equal work instead of the two-tier pay and benefit system that is proposed by Kaiser bosses. Kaiser Permanente workers want contracts that protect the future of healthcare for the workers that provide it as well as for those that receive it.

They seek to protect patient care and access to services for patients. The Mercy hospital workers' main demands are for better staffing and a safe working environment. They are also demanding better wages and a better health insurance plan to attract and retain staff. Importantly, the health workers' demands in this strike wave are not limited to wages but are also about health provision that prioritises care instead of profit-making. Health workers' demands are also about building unity among the working class in response to fragmentation that is caused by the two-tier pay and benefit system.

Kellogg workers' main demands are also directed at the company's divisive two-tiered system. The system divides workers by forcing newer casualised employees and older employees who are doing the same work to get different pay and benefits. Kellogg workers also want more workers to be employed to lessen the burden of long hours placed on the current workforce. These demands have united the Kellogg workforce and thus undermined the bosses' intentions of cutting labour costs and fragmenting workers.

The confidence of the John Deere workers has clearly been increased by the strike. They voted against a second tentative agreement that included an immediate 10% raise plus two more 5% raises and three 3% lump sum payments during the six-year contract. The tentative agreement also removed the "third tier" that John Deere had proposed and preserved the option of a traditional pension for all new hires. The agreement restored a cost-of-living adjustment, boosted the existing pensions, and added retirement bonuses. However,

John Deere workers are insisting on a deal that includes retiree health insurance which is currently offered only to workers hired before 1997. Workers are arguing that they have sacrificed their bodies to produce the farm equipment for the company and that the company can afford retiree health insurance for its workers. John Deere workers are fighting for a deal that brings real wages up to pre-'97 levels, taking John Deere's record profits into account, and are pushing for a faster grievance procedure that quickly resolves workers' complaints.

The October strikes are an important development. Workers are collectively standing up to change their situation and inspiring other workers through their actions. Any gains made from these strikes will bring confidence to the millions of workers who remain unorganised. The strikes also show the importance of solidarity as seen in the demands around equal pay for equal work, as well as in the demands of health workers that speaks to the interests of patients. The strikes are empowering workers to take charge of their lives as well as their organisations. Many of the workers that are unhappy with how union tops are handling negotiations with the bosses are calling to replace the delegate system with a direct one-member one-vote system for electing union leadership. In this way, workers seek to have more control over their organisations, as vehicles for their struggles. The October strikes in the US teach us that, through engaging in collective struggle, workers are able to build confidence, build solidarity, and strengthen their organisations.

# YOUTH OF SWAZILAND DEFEND THEIR FUTURE AND THAT OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

For decades, the people of Swaziland have questioned the unchecked power held by King Mswati III – Africa's last absolute monarch. Challenges to the system were always met with brute force, banning of political parties, and incarceration of political opposition. However, in June/July 2021 the struggle of the people reached a turning point.

Over a year of surviving under the devastating impact of COVID-19, communities began to clamour for change, as endemic poverty and increasing unemployment made survival all the more difficult, while the Monarchy and the political elite continued to openly display their opulent lifestyles, almost taunting the people! Peaceful marches by communities delivering petitions to their local representatives drew immediate support from three Members of Parliament (MPs), and momentum grew with increasing numbers of communities petitioning their representatives for change.

The marches were significant in the number of young people that participated and took charge across the country. This is not surprising since the country has a growing young population; approximately 40% of the population is under 15 years of age and 52% of the population is below the age of 20, most of whom reside in rural Swaziland. Their anger and frustration with the status quo was very visible during the rolling protests in June/July, as social media became a tool that galvanised young people across the country. Unlike previous demonstrations, where trade unions or civil society would convene and manage protests and demonstrations, the youth self-organised, armed, with social media and have thus far managed to maintain some of the momentum five months later.

Marches which began peacefully quickly descended into looting and destruction of property after the regime unleashed lethal force on the unarmed protesters. Over 70 protestors and people caught in the crossfire were killed, over 300 were injured, and over 800 were arrested on flimsy charges. This massacre of unarmed civilians has bloodstained the myth of Swaziland as the

de facto 'Switzerland of Africa'.

The protests in June/July were covered widely by international media, and the South African media covering the situation much later. By September, media coverage had become intermittent. Then in October, another wave of protests erupted; the protests were being led by school students, all over the country. The security forces once again responded violently. Some schools were destroyed, but the protests did not involve looting and destruction of property, unlike previously. In an area called Hosea, home to one of the MPs currently being held on charges of treason, sedition and murder in relation to the June/July protests, students have refused to go back to school until the release of the MP. Currently, few schools have reopened, with large numbers of students not attending classes.

What has emboldened the people of Swaziland? Maybe it is the popular phrase accredited to Victor Hugo a French poet and novelist who said "Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come". Thirty-five years down the road of King Mswati III capturing the state and plundering state resources, it appears that the people and especially the youth of Swaziland have had enough! The rallying call of the youth-led pro-democracy forces has been "the buck stops here!"

The youth are at the forefront of the fight for a democratic dispensation in Swaziland. Footage circulated on social media during the protests captured clear sentiments from the youth on the Swaziland they want. They demand equality and an end to being treated as slaves and second-class citizens. Their actions are in defense of their future and that of future generations.

Through a number of platforms ranging from social media to peaceful demonstrations, the youth of Swaziland are clear; they are challenging the skewed social stratification that is perpetuated by the Monarchy and the regime at the expense of the working class and the population at large. The extravagant opulence by the king is the backdrop of a country with a national poverty rate of about 63%, an unemployment rate of

Artwork by Abigail Jele (SUDF) created during the ILRIG 2021 Political School in Johannesburg. Photograph courtesy of ILRIG.



41%, and HIV prevalence at 31% – the highest in the world (OCHA, 2018). A 2019 Oxfam Wealth Report title "A Tale of Two Continents: Fighting Inequality in Africa" ranked Swaziland as number one on the list of most income unequal countries in Africa, followed by Nigeria, South Africa and Namibia (Oxfam International, 2019).

King Mswati III has captured the economy through discreet investments and exerts undue influence on the control of the means of production as either a majority shareholder or outright owner in the country's two mobile network operators, insurance sector, energy sector, private hospitals sector, large scale retail, chicken fast food, logistics and pharmaceutical sectors. The youth of Swaziland are challenging King Mswati III and his regime, and they unanimously agree that this can only be possible in a democratic dispensation with a government of the people, by the people, for the people.

The protests conveyed the heightened sense of urgency as the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic

continue to exacerbate existing dire conditions threatening the lives and livelihoods of people. The youth are anxious and impatient. They are terrified at the prospect of having no future or quality of life. Parents on the other hand are also anxious and terrified at the prospect of their young children being killed, injured or arrested as the security forces roam the communities at night, targeting any young person/group of young people found to be outside their homes. Some communities, like Hosea, have become no-go zones after dark, as the young people in the community set up barricades to prevent entry by anyone other than community members.

The bravery and open defiance of young people has shattered any previous notions of a quiet and accepting population. The youth in their actions have plunged the monarchy into crisis, to the point where the King may no longer claim the sacred trust of the people.

**MY STRUGGLE** Issued by Abigail Lomathemba Jele (SUDF Communications Officer)

# STATEMENT BY THE SWAZILAND UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT (SUDF)



Photograph courtesy of Facebook/@sudf2008.

The Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF) is a broad-based representative organisation of a majority of the sectors of the Swazi people, through their member organisations. These organisations, that are a coalition under the banner of SUDF, are the Swaziland Unemployed People's Movement (SUPMO), the Swaziland Rural Assembly (SRWA), Swaziland National Union of Students (SNUS), Arterial Network, Swaziland Consumer Forum (SWACOF), Lalufadlana Rates Payers Association, Siyatfufuka Community Development Organisation, Workers' Federation, Youth and Church Organisation, and People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO).

SUDF is inspired and encouraged to wage the struggle of the people of Swaziland, no matter the high price that our leaders and people pay for standing with the marginalised and oppressed against royal supremacy and domination. Our struggle is against the last absolute monarchy in Africa, which has become an island for oppression and backwardness. At the centre of our struggle against this evil monarchy is the lack of the right to freedom of assembly, association and expression, and the lack of the right to political and economic participation of our people. The bad Tinkhundla system of government has placed all Executive, Legislative and Judiciary powers in the hands of the absolute monarchy. Thus, we fight for devolution of power and political pluralism to create a constitutional multi-party democracy that will promote checks and balances.

This struggle is complex in that we are the only country in SADC engaged in such, when the other countries are already enjoying democracy. The international law of the right to sovereignty makes it difficult to get the necessary international solidarity. Swaziland is a small country that does not need an army, and the army is used to brutally kill all dissenting voices. The high level of oppression is also entrenched by the fact that all land belongs to the King, and we are a landless nation. Any political activists can be evicted without being able to find any

**“The majority of our people, led by the SUDF, have unanimously rejected the absolute monarchy of King Mswati III, and want to enjoy the right to choose their leaders and the way they want to be governed”**

redress in the courts because cases are predetermined, as Judiciary power is vested in King Mswati III. We have been vindicated by the arrest of the Members of Parliament who initiated a call for constitutional reforms to elect the Prime Minister by the people. The rubber stamp Parliament rubbed King Mswati III the wrong way for exercising their right freedom of expression. They were subsequently arrested, and have been denied bail through dubious ways.

The majority of our people, led by the SUDF, have unanimously rejected the absolute monarchy of King Mswati III, and want to enjoy the right to choose their leaders and the way they want to be governed (self-determination). The struggle for democracy began a long-time ago, especially when King Sobhuza II banned political parties through the 1973 decree. We are still under a State of Emergency after four decades. The absolute monarchy has uncontrolled access to state resources in the Central Bank, and owns around 60% of the Economy. This is what allows King Mswati III to use all kinds of weapons to crush opposition, because he believes the country and all in it belong to him personally.

SUDF strongly believes that the international community has a big role to play in this noble and just struggle. We believe that human rights are universal and God-given, thus we appeal for the international community to support Swaziland's people. SUDF knows that the future the country lies in the hands of the Swazis themselves, thus we call on all Swazis in the diaspora to play a meaningful role in the struggle for change in our country.

The road map towards a peaceful transformation is an all-inclusive, mediated political dialogue/ negotiation, total unbanning of political parties, a transitional executive authority, a new democratic constitution, and a multi-party democratic dispensation.

Three poems by Jameelah Davids (Cissie Gool House, Reclaim The City), written and performed at the ILRIG 2021 Cape Town Political School.

## SKIN

*My skin colour is what you look at  
and define me*

*You class me by my skin and it's  
such a sin*

*You feel entitled to treat me lower  
than trash in a bin*

*I never chose the colour of my skin*

*Yet you treat me like it's a sin*

*We won't tolerate towards us*

*Your slander and pain*

*We will fight 'til the end*

*We will fight and defend*

*Our efforts won't be in vain*

*My skin is not a sin*

## STOP STOP STOP, ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

*You came onto our soil and laid claim...to our land*

*Proclaimed you discovered it...*

*Another false claim to fame*

*We to you looked lame*

*But now you see the butterfly we became*

*We vowed we would make your heads hang in shame...*

*We will (re)occupy and reclaim*

*Remember, being homeless or poor is neither a crime nor a shame*

## LIKE THE PHOENIX

*Like the Phoenix we will rise*

*We will rise up out of the ashes*

*Of the fire you made around us*

*We will rise up*

*We will rise and be counted*

*We will rise up*

*'til your blind eyes see us*

*See our needs are as valuable as yours*

*We will rise up*

*The fire inside me burns*

*Brighter than the fire around me...*

*We will rise up*



### FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION: ILRIG 2022 Calendar

The poster in this issue is a linocut print entitled *Following the Elders* by Hlavutelo Ngobeni. This artwork is her representation of the brave women who challenged apartheid repression through the 1959 beerhall boycott in South Africa. This is one of twelve artworks featured in ILRIG's 2022 calendar, *On the Frontlines: Histories of African Women's Resistance*. The calendar contains a selected history of women's leadership and participation in radical organising against oppression on the African continent. These stories reflect the important role that women in Africa have played in collectively building, defending, and advancing emancipatory struggles. In producing this calendar, ILRIG collaborated with six women artists at Artist Proof Studio, a Johannesburg-based community arts education centre. Contact [leila@ilrig.org.za](mailto:leila@ilrig.org.za) for more information about this calendar.

## WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Are you involved in progressive struggles or grassroots workplace/community organising that needs solidarity or that you think more activists should be made aware of? Do you have an analysis of or insights into a struggle or social/political/economic issue or development – whether local, regional or international – that is of interest or relevance to progressive/working class activists and struggles in South Africa that you would like to share? Do you have questions/comments about or disagreements with something published in *Workers' World News*?

Send us your article (max. 600 words) by email or Facebook private message and we will consider publishing it in a future issue.



### CALLING ALL CULTURAL ACTIVISTS

We would love to feature your artwork advocating for alternatives to capitalism, fascism and patriarchy. Please help us make this an inspiring publication by sending us your poetry & songs, photography & graphic design, paintings & drawings, reports & manifestos of cultural activist interventions etc.



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**CHECK OUT OUR WEBSITE – [WWW.ILRIGSA.ORG.ZA](http://WWW.ILRIGSA.ORG.ZA)**

Learn more about ILRIG's work, find out about upcoming events, read *Workers World News* and other articles by ILRIG staff, and access a wide-range of popular education materials, including downloadable booklets, posters and comics.

