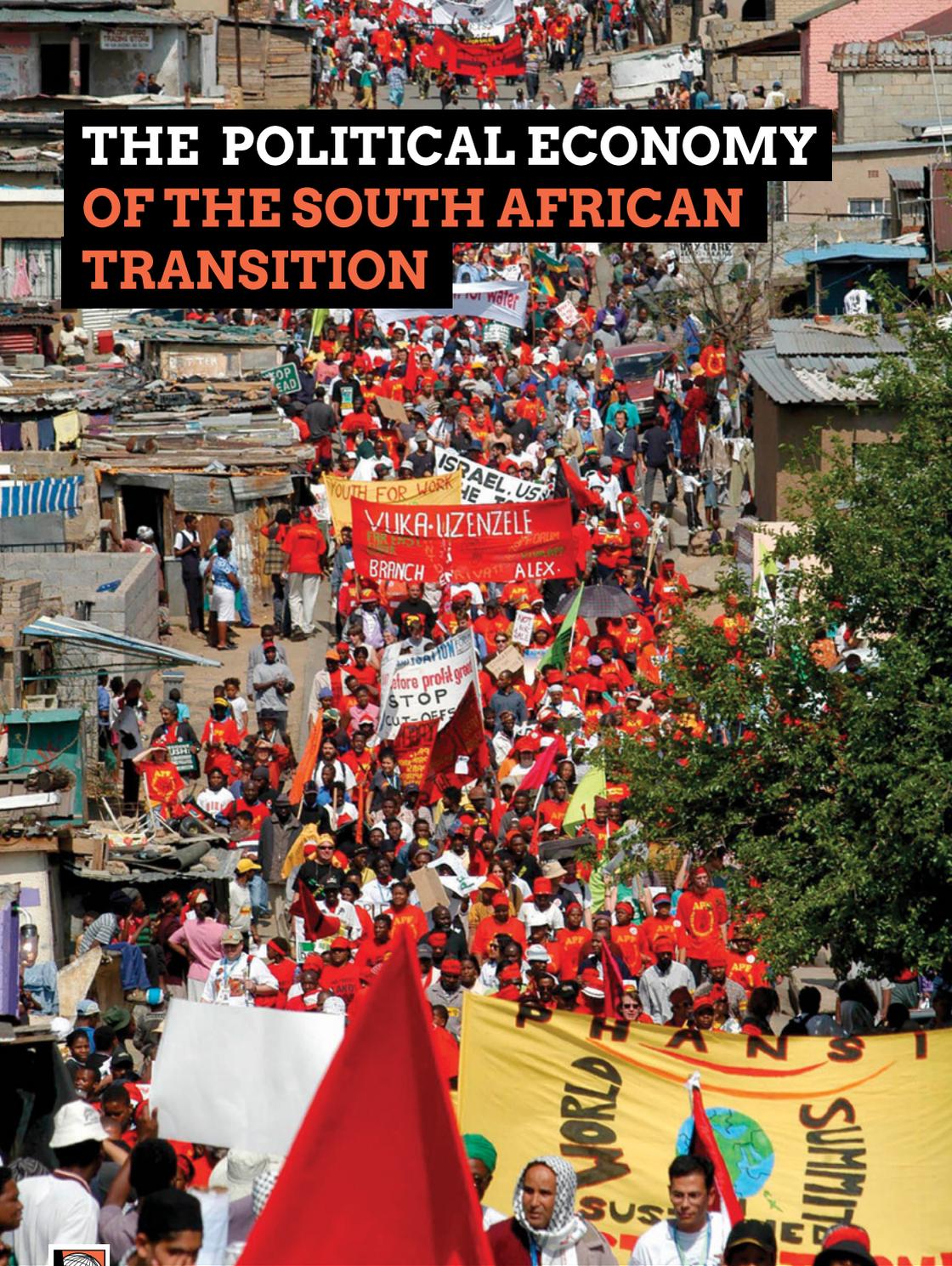


THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSITION



Introduction to the Handbook of Struggle series

This is the first of ILRIG's two-part series – 'Handbook of Struggle'.

The starting point for this series is an understanding of the crucial importance for popular, people's organisations and struggle to recognise the continuities and links between the past and present. For us here in South Africa, that means more specifically, between what came before 1994 and what has happened since.

We hope that the series will be a useful reminder in three particular ways of:

- How South Africa got to where it is today
- The character and content of our more recent history of popular struggle
- The importance of knowing our political and economic history, to inform present and future organisation and struggle.

We also hope that this handbook (and the one to follow), will be used as political and educational tools for activists to:

- Deepen our knowledge of the overall political economy of the South African transition (from the late 1970s to the present)
- Better understand the role and character of the ANC, the state, private capital as well as popular worker and community movements
- Engage with, and learn from, lessons of past and present struggles
- Gain a clearer appreciation of what popular, people's forces are up against and what we fight for today.



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Part of the over 25 000 person march from Alexandra to Sandton on 31st August 2002, led by the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Landless People's Movement, to oppose the elitist agenda of the World Summit on Sustainable Development © Eric Miller

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Glossary of terms

Bourgeoisie: Consists of the capitalist class who are owners of the means of production (e.g., factories, corporations and land), employers of waged labour and those who control the state apparatus as well as cultural production (e.g., the main media).

Chauvinism: A belief in the superiority or dominance of one's own country, group (e.g., race or ethnicity), social attitudes, causes, and/or gender.

Commodity/commodification: Within a capitalist economy, a commodity is any good or service produced by human labour which is then offered as a product for general sale on the market. Commodification is the transformation of things such as goods, services, ideas, nature, personal information, people or animals into objects of trade.

Corporatisation/corporatist: The process by which state and public assets, enterprises, agencies and organisations are transformed and restructured into corporations or independent commercial companies. It can also refer to the way in which politics and governance come to reflect the core features and practices of a corporation (e.g., of profit-seeking, of accumulation).

Dialectics: A method of reasoning and argument involving some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides that seeks to establish the truth.

Financialisation: A process whereby capitalist financial markets (e.g., stock exchanges), financial institutions (e.g., banks) and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes at both domestic and international levels, resulting in capital being allocated away from real investment to financial speculation and a rise in debt-driven consumption.

Hierarchy: An arrangement where people, objects, names, values, categories, etc. are represented as being 'above', 'below', or 'at the same level as' one another – i.e., ranked according to relative status or authority.

Insurrectionary: An insurrection is an act or acts of revolt against civil authority, an established government/state and those with political and economic power. An insurrectionary period arrives when these acts translate into a revolutionary upsurge of the broad working class/ poor to get rid of the existing authority/power.

Minerals-Energy Complex (MEC): The MEC refers to the interaction of a core set of heavy industries, powerful class interests and institutions, which evolved

around minerals extraction and processing to form a distinctive system of profit and accumulation.

Nationalisation: The act or process by which privately-owned assets and/or enterprises are transferred to the ownership of a national government/state. It also refers to the transfer of assets/enterprises from municipal and local governments to a central/national government.

Neo-liberalism: A specific form of capitalist ideology and practice which has, over the last 40 years, become the dominant frame for development globally. The core ideas of neoliberalism are: that the capitalist market possesses a 'natural efficiency'; that competition is good and at the heart of all human relations; that government intervention in and/or regulation of, the economy is distorting and inefficient; and, that when capitalist 'free markets' fail they can be easily corrected, with minimal socio-economic costs.

Participatory democracy: A model of democracy in which there is a broad participation of people in politics and where people have the power to directly shape and make decisions that affect their lives and society.

Petit-bourgeois: Literally means 'small bourgeoisie'. It is a class consisting of small proprietors (e.g., owners of small businesses, self-employed artisans), small land owners/farmers, and workers who manage the production, distribution, and/or exchange of products/services owned by the bourgeoisie.

Privatisation: The act or process by which assets/property (e.g., land), enterprises and services (e.g., water) that are owned by the government/state or by other social/public entities, are transferred to and owned by the private sector. There can also be partial privatisation whereby the government/state finances the provision of services either by purchasing the services from private vendors (outsourcing/contracting out), or by providing vouchers to individuals, agencies, or corporations to purchase the services.

Representative democracy: A form of governance, at whatever level, in which people elect others – either as individuals or groups/parties – to represent them (e.g., in Parliament, as President, as party/organisational leader etc.).

Statism: Taken from the word 'state', which refers to centralised executive authority (administration of laws, management of national budgets and maintenance of police and military establishments). As such, 'statism' describes institutions and political practices in which such a state is seen and treated as the main goal or prize of political contestation and struggle, and which gathers increasing levels and varieties of power into its hands on behalf of 'the people'.



South African history as a divided and unstable house

Picture South Africa as a house. Having previously been built on foundations embedded in the systematic economic, racial and political oppression of the majority of its inhabitants in the form of apartheid capitalism, the house came to be controlled by the National Party (NP) as political landlords, in conjunction with white capitalists as economic landlords. After much struggle and then negotiation, there is a handover of political landlords; the house has been 'liberated'. The African National Congress (ANC) replaces the NP and takes occupation of the stateroom. However, the economic landlords are allowed to retain their penthouse suite and, it is soon revealed that, in the handover agreement, the new 'post-apartheid' government has agreed to – other than excavating the formal, institutional and legislative pillars of apartheid – leave the other foundations of the house well alone.

What does happen is that new house rules are adopted, some redesigning and construction of additional rooms takes place, and a new paint job is completed. All of this makes the house look much more attractive than before and, indeed, the newly available rights, spaces and associated living conditions for the majority of its



inhabitants are a definite improvement on the previous dwelling. Nonetheless, as time goes on, the new (political) and old (economic) landlords are slowly but surely upping the rent; charging the inhabitants for everything; allowing the people's rooms to fall into disrepair; changing the house rules to suit themselves; installing spy-cams and bugs all over the place; hiring more house security and erecting higher walls around the property; taking all the best goodies from the pantry; removing much of the house cash and new rental profits out of the house; and, all the while, living it up in the constantly expanding and bling-styled staterooms and penthouse suites. Crucially, the landlords continue to ignore ever-clearer warning signs that the house foundations are structurally unsound.

When we apply this house comparison into a critical look at the realities of the last 28 years of South Africa's journey, it confirms one thing beyond doubt: there can be no meaningful liberation for the majority without a simultaneous assault on the architecture that constitutes the foundational root of South Africa's problems. Simply put, it is a capitalist system, overlaid by a historical, racialised construction and division, whose core being and practical purpose are the pursuit of profit, accumulation and power. Tragically, the human and natural costs of this pursuit are only relevant if they threaten these three foundational pillars of capitalism.

The truth is that liberation turns out to be little more than a political and racially framed shifting of the capitalist veranda chairs without a corresponding transformation of socio-economic foundations, without a class revolution.

This is surely the most fundamental lesson of South Africa's political economy (both past and present) and the struggles for change that have been waged by its people.



October 1985

President Botha declared a state of emergency in riot-torn Cape Town and seven surrounding areas following the arrests of 85 anti-apartheid activists. At least 30 people died over 12 days of unrest around Cape Town.

© Eric Miller

LATE 1970s/ EARLY 1980s

Gathering crises and popular resistance

The late 1970s was a time when all sorts of social and political forces – both reactionary and progressive – were stirring, and the long-brewing contradictions of apartheid-capitalism were beginning to bubble to the surface. Spurred on by increasingly anxious domestic capitalists, apartheid authorities sought ways to reform the system without any subsequent loss of political or social control. The new cabinet of P.W. Botha (NP leader elected to the Premiership in the 1978 all-white elections) set out to do just that, having come to power on the back of a ‘total strategy’ plan to defeat ‘revolutionary’ resistance and win the hearts and minds of non-whites through economic and political co-option.

The first ‘shot’ in this strategic war was the formation of the Wiehahn Commission in 1979 to investigate labour relations and conditions. The Commission recommended reform of trade union legislation, education and ‘influx control’ of the black urban population. The implementation of such reforms presented the apartheid state with many challenges precisely because the reforms provided the space for renewed resistance by both the black and white working class.

For the black working class, the reforms allowed for the phenomenal growth of militant independent trade unionism, with the numbers of registered union members increasing from 220,000 in 1980 to 670,000 in 1983. These independent trade unions were, for the most part, separate from the ANC Alliance-aligned SACTU and included the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA).¹

The apartheid state desperately needed to find internal allies, and further attempts were made at co-option: for example, the Indian and Coloured communities were



invited to join the Tri-Cameral Parliament system in the early 1980s; increased economic opportunities were extended to the small black middle class; and the recently created 'independent states', 'self-governing' homelands and local municipal authorities were offered as the driver for petit-bourgeois, ethnically-driven capital accumulation, albeit with limited political power.

Although these reforms accelerated resistance to the apartheid state, they also introduced powerful forces of co-optation and encouraged division amongst the oppressed. The 'homelands' unleashed ethnic and class forces which were increasingly difficult for the liberation movements and the black working class to ignore. Additionally, although the black middle class was small in relative terms, the new opportunities for its consolidation and growth (along with that of the Indian and Coloured population) provided a strong petit-bourgeois presence among those opposed to apartheid, thereby increasing tensions.

However, faced with increasing levels of political and economic crises, the apartheid state was unwilling to carry out the necessary political reform that might have bought it more time, while the deep structural economic crisis made it impossible for the regime to buy its way out. Increasing numbers of workers, students and the unemployed intensified their economic and political demands and struggles.

Most of the issues central to these demands were focused on local grassroots economic and social conditions (wages, education, housing, rent, electricity) as well as political involvement (municipal council representation, policing). In turn, these demands and the need to organise around them, led to the phenomenal growth of community civic associations as well as student, women and religious organisations.

The desire to bring together these different struggles on a national level led to the formation of the National Forum in June 1983. Representatives of AZAPO, the Cape Action League and a few ANC-aligned activists were all present at its opening conference. Shunning the 'Charterist' tradition (so-called after the adoption of the Freedom Charter) as too liberal and ethnically defined, the National Forum adopted an 'Azanian Manifesto', which called for an anti-racist struggle against capitalism and apartheid. However, the Forum, which itself was ridden by ideological disunity, placed far too much emphasis on the power of ideology as a mobilising tool. As a result, it severely limited its scope of influence and compromised its ability to act as a militant unifier.



The 'Charterists' quickly disassociated themselves from the Forum and undertook efforts to launch their own national organisation. This led to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in August 1983. Much like the ANC, the UDF leadership argued that national unity required the suppression of class divisions and the adoption of the broadest possible programme. Although this strategic approach was partly explained by the UDF's desire to operate legally, in reality it reflected a specific ideological choice. In other words, the UDF was using a particular ideological approach to conceptualise the 'nation' and opposition to those it considered outside of this.

Much like the ANC, the UDF leadership argued that national unity required the suppression of class divisions and the adoption of the broadest possible programme.

In its bid to create as broad a united front as possible the UDF began to woo white and black capitalists – a move that brought the UDF financial assistance from many major (white)

South African capitalists. Domestic capital had long realised that to save its free enterprise system it would have to find ways to influence the 'struggle'. The best way to do that was to deepen and extend the UDF and ANC's openness to a vision of a deracialised capitalism.

While the UDF's national campaigns spurred the growth of new grassroots organisations, the campaigns did not directly address the worsening material and social conditions of the majority. People on the ground seemed determined to launch their own frontal assault. On 3 September 1984 (the same day as the installation of Botha's Tri-Cameral Parliament) the townships in the Vaal Triangle² near Johannesburg erupted. No longer willing to put up with local apartheid controls and feeling the full brunt of the economic crisis, residents took to the streets, burning businesses and government buildings, setting up roadblocks and battling with police and attacking municipal councillors. So began the most intense and sustained mass struggle in the history of South Africa.

What made the Vaal uprising so significant was the linkage that the residents made between local grievances and national political and economic change. This uprising did not, unlike much of the earlier mass struggle, emanate from the confines of a national leadership intent on pursuing pre-formulated political goals, but it was the



direct expression of grassroots politicisation of local material and social grievances. Fed up with incessant rent hikes, exploitative labour conditions, appalling living conditions, inadequate education and corrupt, state-appointed local councillors, the Vaal residents directed their anger at anything representative of apartheid capitalism.

The ripple effect of the Vaal uprising was impressive in its breadth and speed. Within weeks of the initial street battles, several parts of the country were literally on fire. Most of the civic associations and other groups which took up the struggle quickly affiliated to the UDF (if they did not already belong), but there were also active groups affiliated to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) tradition, such as the Azanian Students Movement. Besides the more organised resistance, thousands of youth joined the fray in pitched battles with police often without any

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formal leadership or structure. Many were responding directly to the ANC's well-publicised call in early 1985 to make the townships – and ultimately the country – ungovernable. Tellingly though, neither the ANC nor the UDF were able to exercise much control or direction over the often spontaneous expressions of resistance from the grassroots.

It was partly the necessarily anti-capitalist content of the Vaal uprising

and subsequent nationwide mass struggle that gave it a historic opportunity for realising a radically transformative politics. A strategy was needed that would build on the people's anger; a strategy that organised and provided leadership to struggles that would be equally undermining of both the institutions and practice of political and economic oppression (that is, of apartheid and capitalism).





Cape Town, 23 March 1987.

First Cosatu rally in the Western Cape at UWC Stadium. © Eric Miller

MID-LATE 1980s

The struggle for people's power and its contradictions

By the middle of 1985 the UDF leadership was trying to play catch up, admitting that, “in many areas, organisations trail behind the masses, thus making it more difficult for a disciplined mass action to take place”.³ For its part, the apartheid state moved back and forth between harsh repression and further reform.

However, with resistance showing no signs of abating, a partial state of emergency was declared on 21 July 1985. At the same time, apartheid security forces were given wide powers of arrest, detention and search and seizure. In an attempt to stamp out grassroots resistance and organisations, the apartheid state arrested and detained many of the UDF's regional and national leadership and sent police and the army into the townships. While the apartheid security forces and youth fought it out on the streets, the UDF began to encourage a change of tactics to try and exert more control over local struggles. Arguing that there was a need to hit the apartheid state where it hurt, UDF leaders called for consumer boycotts against local white businesses.

Although nationwide boycotts ensued, the tactic met with differing degrees of success. Unfortunately, many of the actions were marked by the use of coercion, criminal elements acting in the name of the UDF/ANC/SACP, and the development of an intolerance for those who advocated different tactics. This highlighted a major shortcoming of those who were supposedly leading the mass struggle. Without well organised popular underground structures able to give direction, disciplined leadership and effective armed support for legitimate resistance, the potential for realising the goals of the uprising was wasted.

As in the past, the organised black working class emerged as the leading element in the liberation struggle. Coming together in the newly formed Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on 1 December 1985, the working class was able to take its economic muscle directly into the political arena. COSATU brought



together unions that had been in FOSATU, several independent unions and the large National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Linking up with community and student groups and bringing with it the militancy of hundreds of thousands of workers, COSATU provided much needed cohesion and direction to the ongoing resistance. Not long after its formation, COSATU leaders travelled to Lusaka to meet with the externalised ANC and SACP leadership, where they quickly endorsed the Freedom Charter and allied COSATU to both organisations.

The intensity of grassroots struggle continued well into 1986. With the added strength of COSATU, there reigned an attitude of supreme confidence that liberation, or as the nationwide slogan proclaimed, 'people's power', was just around the corner. Since the general uprising had taken hold, the notion of people's power had surfaced as the defining goal of resistance, to be achieved in combination with a 'people's war', which would provide the organisational and military means to achieve people's power.

In the townships and some rural areas, slogans such as 'liberation before education', and 'people's justice' clearly expressed the belief amongst many at the grassroots, that they were well on the way to replacing the apartheid state. However, the notion of people's power and the idea that dual power (parallel institutions controlled by the masses) was on the verge of delivering national liberation, confused hope with reality.

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The joy that had gripped liberation movement leaders and their followers after the lifting of the first state of emergency in early March 1986 was short-lived. Only three months later, on 12 June, P.W. Botha announced a second nationwide state of emergency that gave virtual control of the country to the securocrats (high-ranking military officers) in his cabinet. Within days, thousands of army troops had been deployed into the townships, arrests and detentions were drastically stepped-up, and harsh censorship regulations on the press were instituted.

By the end of 1986, several thousand people had been arrested, the majority of whom were community activists and students. Battles raged in numerous townships and in the rural areas of Natal, not only between apartheid security forces and ANC-



aligned supporters, but increasingly between these supporters and other black people representing covert state-sponsored vigilantism and competing political groups. For example, the state was able to manipulate conflict by turning Inkatha into an ethnically-based surrogate which sought to combat the ‘communism’ of the ANC Alliance and preserve Zulu ‘culture’ through appeals to rural-based Zulu identity.

In response, and as part of yet another attempt to gather its disorganised forces, the UDF launched two nationwide campaigns in late 1986 and early 1987. Yet, both the ‘Christmas Against the Emergency Campaign’ and the ‘Unban the ANC’ campaign met with limited organisational success. As one observer noted at the time, “The UDF’s reliance on mobilisation and protest often conflicts with organisational requirements. Resources which could be devoted to organisation have been dissipated in attempts to mobilise dramatic ... campaigns”.⁴

Although popular resistance had certainly made major inroads into the apartheid state’s control of the townships, and to a lesser degree in some of the rural areas, the national authority and coercive capacity of the apartheid state was not greatly weakened. The key ingredients for a potentially successful insurrectionist seizure of

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power – strategically organised, armed and nationally consolidated organs of people’s power – were absent. As it stood, the apartheid state, although facing a serious economic crisis and a political crisis of legitimacy, was not fundamentally undermined.

Indeed, as the total strategy of the apartheid state took its physical and psychological toll, serious divisions within both resistance circles and

in the black urban population began to appear. Many township residents were increasingly put off by the enforcement of boycotts and the often indiscriminate use of people’s justice by township youth, commonly referred to as ‘comtsotsis’,⁵ acting in the name of the ANC/SACP/UDF. Likewise, many union members expressed their opposition to the mobilisation strategies of many UDF activists and the increasingly authoritarian practices used to ensure their success. Even making these criticisms was often seen as a betrayal of the symbols of the struggle.



Just when the need for building an effective underground to cope with the increased repression and to provide organisation and direction to grassroots struggles was greatest, the UDF responded by restructuring its national bureaucracy and embarking on a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the white populace and liberal domestic capital.⁶ This confirmed the defeat of any genuine notion of an insurrectionary implementation of people's power. The UDF's approach was directly in line with the ANC tactic of isolating the apartheid regime by bringing together the broadest anti-apartheid front possible. Such an approach allowed for a false division between apartheid and capitalism. The result of this, was to lead to a strategic alliance with important sections of capital against the apartheid state. Regardless, the apartheid state felt confident enough to ban the UDF in early 1988.

The turn to negotiations: a triumph of the elites

While the externalised ANC leadership was trying to find a route to the negotiating table, Nelson Mandela was busy doing the same from inside his prison cell. Following the lead of his organisation, Mandela had first suggested a route to negotiations in 1986. By 1989, Mandela had submitted a lengthy letter to the apartheid state, which revealed for the first time that the ANC was willing to compromise on its basic guiding principle of the liberation struggle – majority rule. Accusing the apartheid state of not being serious about negotiations due to its demand that the ANC renounce violence, Mandela sent a clear message of accommodation.⁷

Following Mandela's proposals, the ANC, along with its internal allies, drafted what came to be known as the Harare Declaration, which set out the ANC's desire for a negotiated settlement regardless of the whether the majority of its own members, supporters and the South African population substantially differed. It argued that a 'political settlement' leading to a 'non-racial democracy' had always been the 'preference of the majority of the people of South Africa' and, concluded by laying out the ANC's vision for the formation of an interim government to draw up a new constitution and supervise elections.⁸

What the Harare Declaration reflected was the culmination of the organisation's own choice of political strategy for national liberation, the failure of any insurrectionary possibilities and the many pressures and influences of international forces. The



result was that the negotiations strategy was a done deal. Negotiations were now presented as a 'new terrain of struggle' for power, whose character and direction would be 'determined by the masses'.⁹

For its part, the apartheid NP had replaced Botha with the more reform minded F.W. de Klerk. Clearly, de Klerk and his advisors understood that if there was going to be any chance of dealing with the crisis of apartheid capitalism, they would have to pursue a negotiated political settlement.

De Klerk immediately adopted measures to allow greater freedom of political activity. With the Mass Democratic Movement – MDM (the new name for the reconstituted UDF) – having embarked on a new Defiance campaign, de Klerk responded by backing off from overt repression and confrontation. Emboldened by the political space thus created, the MDM held the national Conference for a Democratic Future in December 1989 at which the Harare Declaration was formally adopted. The ANC's internal allies had formally jumped on board the negotiations train.

The announcement on 2 February 1990 by de Klerk to release Mandela, unban the ANC, SACP, PAC and a host of other allied organisations, and open the door to a negotiated end to apartheid rule, represented confirmation of corporate

For all the ideological, political and military battlegrounds that had been traversed during the previous decades (most particularly in the 1980s) by the main protagonists, it was the core interests of corporate capital that won the war.

capital's effective capture of a long-planned political process towards a post-apartheid South Africa. For all the ideological, political and military battlegrounds that had been traversed during the previous decades (most particularly in the 1980s) by the main protagonists, it was the core interests of corporate capital that won the war.

Key representatives of South African corporate capital had held talks with the ANC exiled leadership in the mid-1980s.¹⁰ After those talks, the previous

fears that capital might have had of a potentially anti-capitalist post-apartheid political economy were largely gone. And, indeed, the transitional programme proposed by De Klerk in February 1990 was in full compliance with what corporate capital had laid out in 1986.¹¹ Besides the release of most 'prisoners of conscience'



and the unbannings, the stated aims of the apartheid regime's agenda were 'a democratic constitution; universal franchise; an independent judiciary; the protection of minority as well as individual rights; freedom of religion; and a sound economy based on proven economic principles and private enterprise [i.e. capitalism]'.¹²

Whether some in the leaderships of the liberation forces and associated support bases (never mind the country's black majority) were in full agreement with this programme of the apartheid state and corporate capital team was, by this stage, no longer a main factor. The fact was that the core leadership of the ANC as well as its external and internal Alliance partners were now in the driving seat as the main 'representatives' of the liberation struggle.

In addition, events in Eastern Europe and the USSR had, besides the obvious loss of military and financial assistance, dealt a severe ideological blow to those in the liberation movement who had looked to the USSR as the model for transforming South Africa. Whole generations of ANC and SACP cadres (both external and internal) had been brought up on a steady diet of Stalinist, commandist 'socialism', and when it all disintegrated they were left in an ideological vacuum. The accompanying disillusionment, combined with the new conditions of negotiation, made the liberation forces more susceptible than ever to strategic and ideological co-option.

On the 'other' side of the fence, and despite their weaknesses, the moves by de Klerk's apartheid state put it and corporate capital in the best possible position to exercise maximum control of the negotiated transition. Most crucially, with such control the interests and long-term domination of the existing (white) capitalist ruling class would best be assured. Likewise, the continued existence of a still powerful security apparatus in the hands of the apartheid state would act as the ultimate

guarantor of an outcome favourable to the two main components of the ruling class (i.e., the white, bureaucratic-apartheid elite and private capitalists).

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Cape Town, 4 May 1990.

1st public appearance of Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk at Groote Schuur Minute.

© Eric Miller

1990-1992

Leaving the workers and poor behind: Talks, violence and demobilisation

The first talks between the ANC and the apartheid state in the weeks that followed the February 1990 'breakthrough' took the form of a series of personal meetings between De Klerk and Mandela. This sent a clear signal that much of the early negotiations process would be dominated by personalised engagement between the two 'big men', a trend that was to continue right up until a final agreement was reached over three years later.

Even if it did not seem so at the time, this was hugely important for two particular reasons: it gave legitimacy to Mandela's almost superhuman status outside and beyond the democratic collective, thus providing space for him to personally mould the overall negotiations agenda for the alliance; and, it laid the groundwork for what were later to become a series of secret negotiations centred on post-apartheid economic policy that involved a select group of leaders from the ANC alongside both domestic and international corporate capital.

Despite the personal meetings and the first formal gathering of delegations in Cape Town in May 1990, there was an escalation in violence, most of which was targeted at grassroots activists and members of the ANC Alliance and independent community/civic organisations.¹³ Indeed, the violence continued right up until the eve of the democratic elections in April 1994. According to the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), during the 1990–1994 period, over 15,000 people died as a result of 'political violence', whereas 'during the preceding five years, 1984–1989, 3,500 people had died as a result of political conflict'.¹⁴

In other words, the early 1990s was a period of politically-linked violence which exceeded that experienced during the height of armed struggle and mass internal opposition to apartheid rule. This completely contradicts the often repeated claim that what South Africa experienced after 1990 was a 'miracle' embedded in a



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largely 'peaceful transition'. The reality was that a direct link existed between this violence and the demobilisation and disappearance of a majority of the grassroots organisations and movements which had been at the forefront of people's struggles in the 1980s.

The response of the ANC-Alliance leadership was half-hearted. Besides some minimal support for community-organised self-defence units, much of the response took the form of public statements attacking the role of the apartheid regime's covert operations and promising to take the matter up with the De Klerk government. What this clearly showed was that the chosen path to power (an accommodationist and elite-led negotiated settlement) trumped the stated commitment to protect and defend the lives and interests of members, supporters and, indeed, the workers and poor as a whole.

On the ideological and policy front, things were not going much better for 'the people'. At its 1991 national conference, the ANC resolved not to pursue a post-apartheid policy of nationalising large-scale private land for redistribution.¹⁵ Soon thereafter, ANC leaders went on a public charm offensive to convince their broad alliance that nationalisation was no longer 'an ideological attachment' of the organisation.¹⁶ This was followed by public comments welcoming international corporate capital and Western governmental involvement in creating a 'democratic economy'¹⁷ as well as macro-economic policy proposals by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the apartheid state and corporate capital continued to work hand in glove to intensify the privatisation or corporatisation of key public enterprises.

On the worker front, COSATU began to wrap itself up in corporatist deal-making with domestic corporate capital and the state, devoting much of its energies to institutionalising bargaining agreements. Although COSATU leaders argued that these moves were in the interests of workers, the reality was that workers had little say in decisions made. The commitment of the COSATU leadership to seek common ground with capital and the state meant that any anti-capitalist struggle by organised workers would have to be contained within the boundaries of that very process.



A classic example was De Klerk's unilateral imposition of a new, anti-progressive and anti-poor Value Added Tax (VAT) in late 1991. Besides the South African economy having registered a negative growth rate in 1991, the unemployment rate was (unofficially) hovering at around 40%, and large-scale retrenchments of workers were ongoing. Although COSATU mobilised an anti-VAT coalition and called a two-day nationwide strike, VAT was not rescinded, and high-level talks resumed on centre stage. The result indicated that as long as the mass struggle continued to be strategically confined within an accommodationist process of talks, the interests of workers and the broad population would take a back seat to those of capital and the state.

As if that wasn't bad enough, a large section of workers was also busy defending their communities. This severely affected their ability to direct energies and efforts to organise around workplace demands and larger political issues. It did not help that COSATU had largely ignored the needs and mobilisation of migrant hostel-dwellers, which indirectly contributed to Inkatha's success in organising these alienated hostel-dwellers to participate in violent campaigns against surrounding communities and Alliance supporters.¹⁹

By the time the official CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) talks got underway in December 1991, what had emerged was an approach to liberation oriented to dominant political and economic power (the state and capital) as opposed to the contingent power of the majority of people (workers and the poor). Within this frame, access to and use of state power (through the political party form) would become the main vehicle for a new (deracialised) class formation and accumulation as well as for assuming the role of political custodian of 'the people and 'the (new) nation'.

The commitment of the COSATU leadership to seek common ground with capital and the state meant that any anti-capitalist struggle by organised workers would have to be contained within the boundaries of that very process.





Johannesburg, 21 December 1991.
Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA).
© Eric Miller

1992-1994

Entering the [com]promised land

When the interests of those with political and economic power are threatened, they always turn to those on the other side of the fence who they believe are most open to compromise and can best help them get out of the 'mess'. By the end of 1993, those efforts had paid off handsomely. All formally elected ANC officials – the vast majority of the Alliance's national leadership, leaders and key activists from what was left of the MDM/civic movements as well as many intellectuals and sectoral 'experts' – had joined the march towards the (com)promised, post-apartheid land.

The best confirmation of this was the agreement by the ANC to take a significant loan (US\$850 million) from the IMF before it even came to power, a move which committed a future government to a range of corporate-friendly macroeconomic policies. Along with the agreement to honour the massive and illegitimate debt accumulated by the apartheid state, this went a long way to ensuring that, right from the start, the socio-economic status quo would be further entrenched.

What this represented was a 'statist' approach to the 'democratic revolution'. In this situation, the state is given the status of the struggle throne, a victory, but with actual revolutionary people's struggle for systemic change being made secondary. In other words, political control of the state is achieved without a corresponding transformation of the socio-economic sphere. In embracing this approach, the ANC and its liberation struggle were being brought 'home', with the South African 'house' now being prepared for the institutionalisation of the ANC's historical strategy of incorporation and accommodation.

From this point on, the ANC chose to use the struggles of workers and the poor largely as a means of improving its position at the negotiating table. This required that the full weight of the traditional 'left' forces (i.e., COSATU and the SACP) be used to manage and, where necessary, suspend bread-and-butter, class-based and anti-capitalist struggles. Once negotiations became the dominant frame of a



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'transfer of power to the people', the masses were more formally side-lined.

A good example was the 'rolling mass action' campaign announced by the ANC and its Alliance partners soon after halting the CODESA talks in response to the Boipatong massacre.²⁰ While the political leaders claimed that the campaign was designed to 'politically defeat de Klerk', and to ensure that the 'people are part of the process of deciding their own futures',²¹ the reality was that mass struggle continued to be deployed simply as a pressure tactic on the negotiation process.

Senior ANC leader Cyril Ramaphosa confirmed as much when he stated that, "There is no alternative" to CODESA.²² Soon afterwards, the ANC leadership reiterated its commitment to negotiations and reassured the country that its mass action campaign "is not a programme of insurrection" aimed at "a forceful overthrow".²³ As one activist had put it: "The weakness in the way the involvement of the masses in negotiations has been posed is that it has focused almost exclusively on the process of consultation and symbolic or demonstrative actions."²⁴

A nationwide general strike in August 1992 (the planned conclusion of the campaign), which was supposed to last at least a week, ended up being a two-day work stayaway after leaders of the Alliance and representatives of monopoly capital reached a compromise in closed talks.

Throughout 1993, the ANC-Alliance leadership displayed a consistent pre-occupation with what was perceived as serious threats to the transition coming from the (mostly white) far-right.²⁵ In its annual statement, the ANC National Executive Committee highlighted the rationale for further compromise by pointing to the need to 'neutralise dangerous opposition and [...] assist in curbing counter-revolution'.²⁶ Strategically, this gave further support to the prioritisation of a negotiated terrain of struggle.



The sense that, once the state had been ‘captured’, major problem areas (for example, monopoly control of the economy and deep structural inequalities) would be addressed and resolved, came to represent the ‘official’ response to the so-viewed unrealistic expectations of the majority of poor and working class people for more radical change. The ANC-Alliance leaderships’ argument – that to confront such problems in the present would endanger the negotiation process – directly undermined the very demands that had driven South Africa’s struggle for liberation and around which the vast majority of grassroots struggles had united.

This kind of perspective is infused with a petit-bourgeois politics that privileges the power of the dominant class (including the existing state) over the power of the masses in the struggle for liberation. The inevitable result is that the struggles of the majority come to be viewed as secondary, less important than accessing state power. It is the same kind of undialectical approach that has been dominant among the leaderships of national liberation movements across Southern Africa.²⁷ In other words, it is as if both the negotiated compromises themselves and the grassroots struggles of the majority were seen as having no long-term, wider effects on future possibilities.

By the time the April 1994 elections rolled around, the ANC and its allies had been able to exert overall political and ideological authority over the ‘liberation’ terrain and associated popular forces. However, this ‘achievement’ carried with it destructive consequences for organisational, political and ideological diversity. The intolerance and fear of opposition or dissent that had developed widely within the ranks of the liberation movement over the previous decade represented a ‘hidden’ defeat for independent, anti-capitalist grassroots organisation, politics and struggles. The cumulative result was the substitution of the power derived from the poor and workers with that derived from party and state.

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27 April 1994.
Election Day queue.
© Eric Miller

1994

Statism trumps 'people's power'

When South Africa's first fully democratic elections in April 1994 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the ANC, the majority of South Africans understandably celebrated the arrival of a new era. After all, the formal system of apartheid was now officially history, and the main 'forces of liberation' were about to take political control of the national state.

Accompanying this, however, there still remained a widespread (but ultimately mistaken) expectation among the black majority that President Mandela and the ANC would begin to adopt and pursue a more anti-capitalist or, at the very least, radically redistributive political and socio-economic programme. The more immediate bases upon which such an expectation had been built included the continued socialist rhetoric of the ANC, its alliance with the SACP and COSATU, and a mildly redistributive developmental plan in the form of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which the ANC adopted as its 1994 electoral manifesto.

However, a more historical and central reason centred on the militant, mass-based struggles that had been waged since the early-mid 1980s by what can be generally called progressive civil society (but not reducible to the UDF). In other words, these were struggles by trade unions and community or civic organisations, supported by more radical non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics and other political, social and cultural activists.

What had emerged from those struggles was the conception and practical application of a 'people's power', based on self-organisation centred on workers and the poor. Additionally, a politics had emerged that stressed an independence from political party and state control, grounded in concrete struggles against both racial and class oppression. This kind of 'people's power' presented a direct challenge to the dominant 'liberation' strategy of both a deracialised capitalism and a party-centric statism, wherein the 'seizure' and exercise of power is conceptualised as residing within the party and state.



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Unfortunately, it was the latter view that emerged triumphant from 1994 onwards. Instead of supporting and strengthening the community, civic and worker organisations that had formed the backbone of the anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist struggles in the 1980s and early 1990s, the ANC tried to either

co-opt or effectively liquidate them. It called on community and civic organisations to either fold up and become part of ANC branches or to join the newly launched South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO), which would become the 'fourth' member of the ANC Alliance. At the same time, key SACP and COSATU leaders became either government officials or elected ANC politicians, while a wide range of academics, intellectuals and movement activists were recruited for positions in the new ANC-run state.

These developments meant that by the mid to late 1990s the vast majority of progressive civil society forces who had been rooted in the class politics and struggles of workers and the poor had 'disappeared'. Whether swallowed by the ANC and other Alliance structures, weakened by the co-option of key leaders into the state and associated corporatist institutions, or starved of financial resources, the bottom line was that the political and organisational terrain for active and militant resistance to elitist deal-making and centralised power had been seriously narrowed.

It is this kind of strategic statism, combined with the overall embrace of a capitalist neo-liberal orthodoxy (hereafter referred to as neoliberalism),²⁸ which has ensured that the poor and workers have had to take a back seat to a host of powerful social and economic forces opposed to any radical political and socio-economic transformation. As such, any ongoing struggle to fundamentally change power relations within society has become subordinated to the holding and exercise of institutionalised (state-party-capital) political and socio-economic power.





1995. A recipient of an RDP house.
© Eric Miller

MID 1990s

Framing the boundaries

While the majority of the poor and workers accepted, albeit cautiously, the 'historic compromise' that had emerged from negotiations, there were many signs of political and organisational restlessness. For example: the 1993 call by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to break the Alliance after the 1994 elections; the highly publicised 'disciplining' of ANC/SACP stalwart, Harry Gwala, for condemning the compromises made; and the public utterances by COSATU's leadership leading up to the elections that it would 'not be told what to do', all signalled some level of discontent.²⁹

Nonetheless, the political-ideological and organisational buy-in of the SACP and COSATU leadership, was crucial. This ensured that the two largest 'left' and professed anti-capitalist formations were brought into the capitalist/corporatist house and were now also available to provide both the necessary electoral support to the ANC as a political party as well as to become actively involved in the new ANC state.

The main vehicle for ensuring this 'buy-in' was the ANC's 1994 election manifesto, the RDP. Its six basic principles – an integrated and sustainable programme; a people-driven process; peace and security for all; nation-building; linking of reconstruction and development; and democratisation of South Africa – were expansive enough to include the most basic developmental aspirations of organised workers and the poor while also having a broader, multi-class appeal.

The RDP was hailed by the Alliance leadership as the new 'people's programme' whose implementation would lead the way "towards the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future".³⁰ After its electoral victory, the ANC could now democratically claim it represented the organisational expression of the 'people's will' and the RDP, the programmatic equivalent. By successfully 'selling' the RDP as the natural inheritor of the Freedom



Charter, the promises of the ANC as the ‘people’s government’ were now the promises of the RDP as the ‘people’s programme’.

The RDP scored a three-in-one. Its promises of using the state to implement mildly redistributive socio-economic policies and ensure the delivery of basic material needs were enough to win over the majority of a tired and battered population of workers and poor. At the same time, it was ideologically soft enough to appeal to sizeable sections of the still small but growing black middle class as well as an even smaller but expectant black capitalist class. And crucially, it also eased whatever remaining fears domestic and international corporate capital might have had that the ANC would use its newfound power to pursue an anti-capitalist developmental path.

Even though the RDP talked a lot about ‘people-centred development’, ‘people’s power’ and the specific involvement of ‘the people’ in governance and policy formulation, it was the dominant corporatist frame that the ‘people’ (and more explicitly, workers and the poor) were directly excluded from.³¹ That frame required the institutionalisation of ‘the people’s’

participation: through the confined organisational channels of political party representation; through the contained political pathways of electoral politics; and through the formal avenues of statutory corporatist bodies such as the National Economic, Development & Labour Council (NEDLAC). There was no better confirmation of the practical results of this framework than the ANC state’s announcement in 1995, at exactly the same time that it was championing the ‘developmental’ importance of parastatals, of the partial privatisation of “South African Airways and Telkom and the complete sale of several other State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs)”.³²

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The end result was the signing of a National Framework Agreement on the Restructuring of State Assets (NFA) in February 1996 between the government and the main trade union federations. This framework said nothing about reversing the



privatisation and corporatisation of SOEs or putting a halt to the more widespread privatisation process that was also underway at the local government level. Crucially, it placed the labour movement in a position of “co-determining the restructuring of state assets with government on a neoliberal basis.”³³

Legislation was drafted and passed (for example, the Non-Profit Act of 1997), institutions set up like the Directorate of Non-Profit Organisations (which required civil society organisations to officially register with the state), and the National Development Agency (“to direct financial resources to the sector”).³⁴ All of this fit comfortably within the push “for a more formalised civil society constituency as part of a developmental model where formally organised groups participate in official structures to claim public resources” and where “the role of such organised groups is constructed along the lines of official government programmes, without space to contest the fundamentals of those programmes”.³⁵

The RDP ink had hardly dried and yet here were professed communists and radical trade unionists already telling the poor and workers that their most basic developmental needs would largely be dependent on the parallel needs of, and monies from, the capitalist ‘market’.

It did not take long before the political realities and economic consequences of such a strategic ‘buy-in’ began to reveal themselves through some of the very individuals who had been ‘deployed’ into the state. Soon after the 1994 elections, then-Deputy Minister of Finance and leading SACP member Alec Erwin stated, without the slightest sense of irony, that economic growth as a “basic tenet of the RDP” would be premised on job creation in the private sector, not on public sector-led works programmes – one of the ‘basic tenets’

of the RDP.³⁶ Similarly, then-RDP Minister and former COSATU General Secretary, Jay Naidoo, told a gathering of NEDLAC that “there is no way the government can provide even the basic services ... that is why we have to help local government structures to access capital from the markets at favourable rates”.³⁷

The RDP ink had hardly dried and yet here were professed communists and radical trade unionists already telling the poor and workers that their most basic developmental needs would largely be dependent on the parallel needs of, and monies from, the capitalist ‘market’. To defend this yawning gap between promise



and implementation, the ANC needed something more theoretically substantive to rationalise the ideological shift.

To do so, the ANC cleverly sought to equate its acceptance of a capitalist democracy to 'the will of the people'. In this way, the economic 'side' (neoliberalism) could be twinned to the institutionalisation of the political 'side' (liberal democracy). As such, neoliberalism appeared as a necessary and natural economic order emanating from an equally necessary and natural liberal (bourgeois) democracy. Under such a scenario, democracy and development (the key watchwords of the RDP) could then be sold as not only being dependent on but also the same as the growth of a capitalist, neo-liberal 'free market'.³⁸ This was soon put into practice with the final abandonment of the RDP and unveiling of an unapologetically neoliberal macro-economic programme.

The neoliberal 'trick'

Before the 1994 elections, apartheid South Africa was already one of the most unequal countries in the world. This was not surprising given that, at the heart of the apartheid system was the complete political exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation and exploitation of the black majority. When formal negotiations with the apartheid state began in the early 1990s, the ANC and its Alliance partners had a strong, well worked out plan for the political enfranchisement of the black majority. But when it came to the social and economic side of the post-apartheid inequality equation, the exact opposite was the case.

For example, there are only very general 'demands' contained in the 1955 Freedom Charter. These 'demands' are about giving back a host of natural and institutional resources "to the people" as well as providing accessible and quality basic needs/ services "to all". They were accompanied by many equally generalist resolutions and statements about how a new post-apartheid state would address, amongst other things, South Africa's massive socio-economic disparities through the redistribution of land, creation of jobs, provision of social services and meeting of other basic needs for the majority.

Placed within the larger (late 1980s/early 1990s) context of a globally dominant neoliberal capitalist system, highly monopolised, resource-rich and cash-flush domestic corporate capitalists, as well as an NP that had a predetermined plan for how they wanted a post-apartheid economy to look, the ANC was like a



rabbit: immobilised in the middle of the road by the bright lights and speed of the oncoming ‘vehicles’.

Such ‘paralysis’ was much more of a subjective choice than any kind of objective necessity. During the negotiations, there had been intense debates over the direction of post-apartheid economic policy. Out of these debates and in direct response to the ANC’s lack of specific and comprehensive socio-economic policies for a post-apartheid South Africa, a collective of progressive economists presented a 300+ page macro-economic policy framework to “the Democratic Movement in South Africa” in early 1993.

Called the ‘Macro Economic Research Group’ (MERG) Report, the framework laid out a wide range of social-democratic policies as an ‘answer’ to the neoliberals. The Report did not set out the type of a more radically anti-capitalist developmental path that many in the broad liberation movement desired. However, it was designed to directly address the historic, systemic inequalities of the apartheid era and to create the conditions for a redistributive path to economic growth through a participatory and democratically accountable interventionist state.³⁹

Although the subsequent RDP took on board some of the more general ideas of the MERG report, its fundamentals were brushed aside as ‘idealistic’ and effectively ignored. Instead, and as has been detailed earlier, the ANC chose to join the neoliberal chorus. The upshot of this was that the ANC then adopted the age-

The ANC then adopted the age-old tactic of saying one thing to its members and the mass movements, while saying something completely different to themselves and their new-found neoliberal ‘friends’.

old tactic of saying one thing to its members and the mass movements, while saying something completely different to themselves and their new-found neoliberal ‘friends’.

Herein lies one of the most fundamental ‘tricks’ played on the workers and poor. The ‘trick’ is to politically and ideologically destroy the possibilities of alternative ideas and, thus, any actual attempt to put into practice what the

vast majority of those workers and poor desire. Instead, possibility is replaced with inevitability. In this case, the inevitability is that South Africa’s developmental path must follow the broad dictates of neoliberal macro-economics, smoothed over with small doses of micro-redistribution and the provision of some social services,



welfare and basic infrastructure. The trick is, once again, made largely possible through the vehicle of an appeal to a narrow nationalism, a misrepresentation of the 'balance of forces' equation, and a complete distrust of 'the people' themselves.

As the late French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu made so clear, the essence of neoliberalism is about destroying the possibility of anything else; about destroying the aspirations, dreams and struggles of the vast majority of humanity; about normalising both the idea and practice of the dominance of the capitalist 'free market' and corporate capital.⁴⁰ But neoliberalism is not only about economics, it also carries with it tremendous "pedagogical and ideological power" that seeks to control "all of those cultural apparatuses and pedagogical sites that function to produce identities, desires and values that mimic the market. In this sense it is a mode of governance that controls all of social life and not simply the market."⁴¹

In other words, neoliberalism encompasses the entirety of political economy and social relations, precisely because in order for neoliberalism to be practically realised, it must be co-driven by a political entity – the national state. In democracies such as South Africa, since the state is an institution of political, social and economic power that has democratic legitimacy, there is the parallel need for an (elected) party to politically 'run' the state in order to (falsely) extend that democratic legitimacy to neoliberalism itself.

It is this same neoliberal 'essence' that applies also to the 'essence' of the ANC's macro-politics of accession and incorporation. By effectively destroying the possibility of a genuine people's power – a radical, participatory, bottom-up form of democracy and governance – this kind of politics bestows both dominant power and control of representation on those who are (and will soon be) on the 'inside', those who are rewarded for their membership in or support of, the club of corporate capital and the 'free market'.

Once the neoliberal choice had been made, there was no room for meaningful negotiation; no space for serious contestation; and, clearly, no turning back.

Once the neoliberal choice had been made, there was no room for meaningful negotiation; no space for serious contestation; and, clearly, no turning back. Thus, right from the start of the post-apartheid era, an inequality of power, of access, of possibility was (re)institutionalised; i.e., the house divisions were redesigned. GEAR then provided the practical guide. While paying more lip service to addressing inequality and poverty, all the successive and 'new' macro-economic programmes



(the most recent being the ‘National Development Plan’) have not deviated much from GEAR’s core ideological and political demands or its practical pillars.

Just call us Thatcherites⁴²

At the beginning of 1996, the ANC-dominated Cabinet of government ministers announced the shutting down of the RDP Ministry. This shock announcement was quickly followed by the unveiling of a ‘National Growth and Development Strategy’ (NGDS). In a direct assault on the basic redistributive developmental foundation of the RDP, the NGDS explicitly stated that growth would now be the number one priority of socio-economic policy, which would ‘contribute to development’. Before there could be any meaningful response and engagement from the broad working class, a new macro-economic policy framework – the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme – was unveiled in June 1996. Finance minister Trevor Manuel (followed by President Mandela) declared that GEAR was “non-negotiable.”⁴³

GEAR served to confirm the ANC and post-apartheid state’s formal embracing of a capitalist neoliberalism. It forthrightly committed the state, and by implication all members of the ANC-Alliance within it, to implement a strictly monetarist, liberalising and trickle-down growth framework in which the adoption of market-oriented policies would supposedly bring about significant job creation, investment and growth, as well as reductions in poverty and general inequality.⁴⁴

GEAR served to confirm the ANC and post-apartheid state’s formal embracing of a capitalist neoliberalism.

GEAR represented a specific ideological and strategic choice. It formalised, in policy, the ANC’s and the state’s commitment to fiscal austerity, export-oriented growth, various forms of privatisation, a flexible labour market, decreased levels of corporate taxation

and full-scale integration into the logic of a globalised capitalist system. It marked the most prominent of post-apartheid, political ‘lines in the sand’; one was either for or against GEAR.



For those who willingly joined the neoliberal GEAR chorus, there awaited plenty of political and economic benefits, both personal and organisational. For those who attempted to engage in critical debate and who openly expressed their opposition, personal scorn, ‘disciplinary measures’ or gradual marginalisation from the relevant centres of decision-making and power awaited. For those who were more politically susceptible to the bullying or were simply too cowardly to say anything, a government job, political position or well-paid ‘consultancy’ work with the state was the ‘dirty’ prize.

A key result was that the base structures of all three Alliance organisations were severely weakened. Several committed and critically minded activists were either pushed out or became disillusioned and left. Just as crucially, though, GEAR served to further accelerate changes in the newly democratic state’s relationship with ‘civil society’. From now on, that relationship would prioritise institutionalised corporatist interactions as part of a larger project of ‘nation building’, all held together by enforced political and ideological ‘consensus’.

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This relational change was underpinned by GEAR’s choice of programmes for carrying through with the ‘transformation’ of South Africa’s inherited apartheid political economy. These included: economic affirmative action through public sector employment and state assistance to emerging black entrepreneurs; a new black economic empowerment (BEE) programme for selected beneficiaries, largely dependent on corporate capital; and, public-private ‘partnerships’ between state and corporate capital to provide economic and social services.





Khayelitsha, Cape Town. 2012.
A row of communal toilets serves as sanitation for thousands of residents.
© Eric Miller

LATE 1990s/ LATE 2000s

Empowering which classes?

At the core of the plan for 'black economic empowerment' (BEE) was a focus centred on an initial deracialisation and the eventual replacement of the white capitalist class. It was claimed that this would then open the doors to wider scale 'economic empowerment' of the black working class. Indeed, BEE was presented as the logical, and indeed desired, outcome of the liberation struggle itself. In practical terms, this left the new post-apartheid state with two main, inter-linked avenues for building and expanding the black (so-called 'patriotic') capitalist and middle classes.

The first avenue was to place political pressure on white corporate capital to facilitate such BEE through selling (non-core) businesses to existing and emerging black 'investors'. Since there were very few black 'investors' around, the ANC would need to select the candidates, thus guaranteeing that they would be politically loyal and accessible to the organisation for future financial backing. In turn, the chosen 'investors' would be assisted by linked financial institutions, most of whom came from the ranks of private white-owned capital, but also occasionally involving state entities such as the Industrial Development Corporation.

'Special purpose vehicles' were established to access the necessary capital needed to purchase or buy into the business (mostly in the form of shares). This ensured that, from the start, BEE was doubly linked to the needs and performance of the financial side of the capitalist economy. In other words, not only was BEE pursued on the basis of acquired debt, but its 'success' was largely dependent on the performance of these shares. One of the first BEE outfits, the National Empowerment Consortium (NEC), was forced to raise even further debt capital in order to repay its initial debt.⁴⁵



The second avenue was to utilise the institutional and capital resources of the state to facilitate BEE, mainly through the following ways:

- the partial privatisation and full-scale corporatisation of state assets;
- the use of state tenders and outsourced ‘participation’;
- the provision of seed capital and credit for specific (lower level) investors and projects;
- the imposition of quotas of black ownership and management in selected sectors of the economy, most especially the extractive (mining) industries.

There was also a third avenue which claimed to target the ‘empowerment’ of the broader black majority. This would be achieved through:

- a state-led programme of increased expenditure on basic infrastructure, services and public works programmes in poor communities;
- enhanced financial support and economic opportunities through the state, for small, medium and micro-sized enterprises (SMMEs);
- the facilitation of skills training and education for workers through state-led agencies mostly funded through special levies on the private sector;
- investment companies set up by the ANC and its alliance partners, particularly COSATU unions, to ‘invest’ (mainly workers’ monies) in the capitalist market as a means to ‘empower’ the partners and their members.

It should have come as little surprise that the first avenue took centre stage in the immediate post-1994 years. A rash of ‘empowerment’ deals between emergent black capitalists (most often with close political connections to the ANC) and white corporate capital took place. Overnight, new black millionaires were created. They publicly paraded their newfound riches and loudly claimed that this was the start of a new dawn in which all black South Africans could share.

A good example of this was current South African and ANC President, Cyril Ramaphosa and his widely publicised offer of Ikageng Shares for ‘the people’. Senior ANC politicians lauded South Africa’s equivalent of the ‘American dream’, and then-deputy minister of Trade and Industry, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka publicly stated that black businessmen should not be shy to say they wanted to become ‘filthy rich’.⁴⁶



BEE deals were supported by the partial privatisation and full-scale corporatisation of selected state assets/enterprises and the use of state tenders and outsourced 'participation' in large-scale acquisition programmes, such as the notorious arms deal.

This further eroded the institutional and economic base for the public ownership and provision of basic services. The ultimate beneficiary of this reverse 'developmentalism' was, and remains, corporate capital (and more especially banks and financial institutions) alongside the political elites who facilitate it.

then-deputy minister of Trade and Industry, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka publicly stated that black businessmen should not be shy to say they wanted to become 'filthy rich'

Although much talked about within the ANC and included as a key component of the RDP, the mostly state-led third avenue was pushed to the margins. Expenditure on basic infrastructure, services and public works programmes certainly did take place, but these were seen and treated as more of a 'bare minimum' necessity. Furthermore, their 'empowerment' impact was greatly reduced once the practical impacts of the neoliberal GEAR began to kick-in.

What did take centre stage, though, were union investment companies. These included: the National Union of Mineworkers' Investment Company; the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union Investment Group; the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union Investment Company; the National Union of Metalworkers Investment Company; and the South African Rail and Harbour Workers' Union Investment Holdings Limited. In every case, the base capital of these outfits came from workers' pension funds, and their first financial investments were directly linked to existing or potential corporate BEE outfits.

The extent of the ideological and strategic somersaults was breath-taking. For decades, workers and the poor had been consistently told that the main means of realising their socio-economic empowerment was through defeating and collectively socialising 'monopoly capital'. Yet now that political power was won, the actual practice was to place people's capital back into the very hands of that same 'monopoly capital' that has always made their handsome profits through exploiting the working class's labour and material desperation.

So, instead of challenging the capitalist ground rules, the proposition is that these rules must be abided by in order to get a 'piece of the action'. Instead of investing in



socially and environmentally beneficial and sustainable services, infrastructure and work possibilities for all, the people's capital gets used to line elite pockets in both the private and public sectors and handed over to capitalist financial institutions. Meanwhile, massive amounts of jobs are shed in the name of competitiveness, greasing ever-widening circles of patronage and corruption and providing the fuel to intensify the raging fires of inequality. Instead of helping build strong, accountable and worker-controlled unions, internal democracy is weakened, corruption and secrecy flourish, and the material gap between leaders and rank-and-file widens. The examples are everywhere for us to see.

A much 'better life' for some⁴⁷

Even though it is hard to imagine, by the end of the first two decades of democracy, South Africa had already become more unequal than it was at the end of the apartheid era. As a result, the two richest South Africans, Johan Rupert and Nicky Oppenheimer (the poster-boys of white corporate capital) owned the same amount of wealth as 50% of the entire population.⁴⁸ Broadening this out to include the total wealth in South Africa – which in 2013 was estimated to be about R6.5 trillion – 75% was held by the top 10% of South Africans (mostly in financial assets), while only 2.5% was held by the bottom 50% of the population.⁴⁹ It is no surprise that this

by the end of the first two decades of democracy, South Africa had already become more unequal than it was at the end of the apartheid era.

closely follows the apartheid-era pattern of racially defined wealth distribution precisely because its structural underpinnings remained largely intact.

A similar picture emerged in respect of income distribution. Data from 2012 measuring (yearly) household income, shows that black African households' average (or mean) income was R69,632

compared to R387,011 for white households; a difference of 550%.⁵⁰ A different way of looking at the massive increase in wealth and income for the top end of the South African elite is confirmed by the 166% increase in the market value of companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE).⁵¹ Likewise, the gross inequality of wealth makes even more sense when set against the overall profit rate in South Africa, which almost doubled between 1994 and 2011.⁵²



That incredible rise in the profit rate was mostly due to the continued ability of corporate capital to rely on cheap and productive black labour, and more particularly that of black women. Even while the working conditions for many workers had improved since 1994, and the wages of higher skilled workers had increased in real terms, the overall share of wages in the South African economy as a percentage of GDP declined from 57% in 1994 to 50% in 2011.⁵³

Making matters worse, that wage share is weighted heavily in favour of largely male, white-collar workers and management. In other words, the vast majority of whatever wage increases there were in the first 20 years since 1994, were almost entirely “due to wage increases for the richest half of the workforce [and more specifically] ... by wage increases for the top 10 percent.”⁵⁴ To give a sense of the extremes of such wage differences, by 2012 it would have taken the average platinum miner 93 years to earn the average annual bonus of a corporate Chief Executive Officer (CEO).⁵⁵ It has been worse for women, and particularly black women who make up the majority of the workforce: figures from 2014 show that, on average, households headed by women earned less than 50% of households headed by men.⁵⁶

But the neoliberal agenda has always demanded even more exploitation of workers (under the guise of ‘labour flexibility’), and the ANC/state was more than willing to oblige. The result was a huge increase in the number of outsourced/casualised workers, especially within the private sector. For the public sector, 2014 figures show that casual workers in all government spheres increased by 70% to just over 470,000, which translated into almost 20% of all public sector workers.⁵⁷

Further, the very public entities (such as parastatals and utilities) that were supposed to be at the forefront of addressing and confronting inequality were consciously turned into vehicles for intensified mismanagement, self-enrichment and half-baked service delivery. Here, the ‘best practice’ examples include the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (PRASA), South African Airways (SAA), the public transport parastatal Transnet and the public energy utility, Eskom.

By 2012 it would have taken the average platinum miner 93 years to earn the average annual bonus of a corporate Chief Executive Officer (CEO).



Another strong indicator of how the state's macro-economic policy trajectory, combined with a general failure to effectively enforce relevant laws and regulations, favoured the capitalist class was the virtually unconstrained ability of corporate capital and wealthy individuals to move capital outside the country. Whether in the form of shifting profits, service payments, or transfers to offshore companies and bank accounts, billions were 'lost'. For example, according to the state-appointed Davis Tax Committee, "corporate tax revenues declined from 7.2% of GDP in 2008/9 to ... 4.9% in 2012/13", a decline that it attributed to the R200 billion-plus in "corporate transactions" since 2008. The committee stated that this "is an indication that an illicit tax base migration through avoidance tax schemes and practices is taking place."⁵⁸

The practical impacts on workers and the poor were tragically demonstrated in the case of the mining company Lonmin and the workers' strike at its Marikana platinum mine in 2012. While Lonmin argued that it simply could not afford the miners' demand for a monthly wage of R12,500, it turned out that for years Lonmin had been paying 'service and management fees' to an offshore company in the tax haven of Bermuda as well as a Lonmin subsidiary in London to the tune of hundreds of millions of Rands. These funds alone would have been sufficient to meet the miners' wage demands.⁵⁹

Instead, Lonmin's fraudulent 'poverty' plea found a sympathetic ear from the ANC-run state, the COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers, and more particularly from ANC BEE billionaires linked to Lonmin and the mining sector, such as Cyril Ramaphosa. All of them clearly saw the workers' strike as a direct threat to their accumulation pipeline and dominant influence in the mining-energy sector. The end results are well known: the ANC state chose to side with corporate capital and deployed its coercive forces in the form of the police, who then proceeded to forcefully break the strike, massacring 34 workers.

The centrality of the 'Minerals-Energy-Complex' and financialisation

The Marikana-Lonmin case shows how the apartheid-era dominant 'Minerals-Energy-Complex' (MEC) was legitimised, reproduced and extended after 1994. The MEC "refers to the core set of heavy industries, powerful vested interests and institutions which evolved around minerals extraction and processing and their



interaction as a distinctive system of accumulation”.⁶⁰ Central to that accumulation was, and continues to be, the ready availability of cheap black (and mostly migrant) labour alongside active state involvement and policy support.

This produced a situation in which the domestic focus of corporate capital became directed towards “their productive, mining core” while their foreign focus shifted towards a “financialisation of their operations”.⁶¹ By way of explanation, in general terms financialisation refers to the process by which financial institutions, markets, transactions etc., increase in size and influence, resulting in capital being “allocated away from real investment to financial speculation” and a rise in “debt driven consumption”.⁶²

It was this initial financialisation of the MEC that then opened the door to a much wider financialisation of the entire South African economy. Briefly, and as has been the case across the globe, there was a fundamental shift from longer-term productive investment of capital to shorter-term, speculative investment; from public investment with social (labour) value to private investment with no value other than to make as much money as possible within the shortest time; from investment to more equitably expand socio-economic growth and interaction (exchange) to investment that simply seeks to expand corporate and individual wealth, determined by the market ‘mechanisms’ (e.g. shares/stocks).⁶³

This intensified the acquisition of financial assets as opposed to productive assets, which are consistently financed through the expansion of credit and debt (whether at a national/state or local/individual level).⁶⁴ Not only did this provide the main vehicle for the BEE programme, the massive abuse of workers’ pension funds and for a new political class of socio-economic parasites, it entrenched and expanded the structural inequalities of South Africa’s political economy.

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bets. When they lose, which is very often, they simply take or borrow more money to bail them out and to get back into the game. When they win, they take the capital and hide it away or use it to place even riskier bets. In either case, it is ordinary folk who are the 'losers'.

Enclosing participation and voice

The key to a citizenry realising democratic (popular) power and accountability in its relationship with any state and party in control of that state has always been the depth and breadth of active and collective participatory democracy. The popular struggles against apartheid-capitalism were not simply about ending formal apartheid, holding democratic elections and ushering in majority rule. They were fundamentally about the vast majority of people themselves being at the centre of the new democracy, about being actively involved in the democratic process, about the positive and productive exercising of people's power.

However, after 1994, the overall direction of the formal democratic 'rule' of the ANC was defined by the active limiting of democratic participation to tightly controlled institutional structures, supposedly designed as vehicles for dialoguing with and listening to the people. This has been the dominant reality whether applied to education (e.g., School Governing Bodies and Representative Councils of Learners), health (e.g., Health Committees and Hospital Boards), or local municipal governance (e.g., Community Forums and Ward Committees). In general, official bodies have effectively served as institutions of control and authority for a minority with political and economic power.

Little surprise, then, that when the range of community organisations and social movements that arose from the late 1990s onwards began to seek greater accountability at the local level by actively participating in local Ward Committees, they soon found out that they were politically targeted and unwelcome. As one community leader in Orange Farm (a largely shack-dweller community south of Johannesburg) stated: "Most of these people [in Ward Committees] have been taught to love an organisation, the ANC... as long as it's not coming from the ANC then they don't like it ... the ward committees, councillors, they say we are anti-ANC, but we tell them it is what the ANC does that we do not agree with."⁶⁵

This politically and organisationally motivated closing down of institutional (democratic) spaces for participation and voice was, and largely remains, driven



by the ANC, as the ruling party. In its 'Organisational Renewal' document leading up to the 2007 National Conference, the ANC focused on "reclaiming ... [the] vanguard role as the leader of state and society".⁶⁶

The reality is that this 'vanguardist' role was, and remains, at the heart of the hollowing out of the institutional avenues for meaningful popular, democratic participation and voice, and thus, also, responsible for the ANC's increasing disconnection from 'the people'. In practice, this vanguard role requires that people's participation takes place on terms chosen and defined by the ANC; a form of participation that is relegated to being non-oppositional, taking on a secondary, sheep-like role and constituting only those elements chosen and approved by the ANC.

Such realities did not stop the long-running and dishonest attempts to portray most of South Africa's social movements and community organisations as failing to 'engage' with the state. Because of this, a picture was painted of most opposition and dissent being 'anti' everything, as being only interested in shouting loudly and always going to the streets in protest.

Nothing could be further from the truth. For example, there were practical successes in the early-mid 2000s of communities gathered together in movements such as the Anti-Eviction Campaign that prevented tens of thousands of poor people from being evicted from their homes in the Western Cape; or, the Landless People's Movement's that played a central role in securing occupancy rights for farm tenants in rural provinces; and, the ability of numerous community affiliates of the Anti-Privatisation Forum to stop service cut-offs.

Regardless of these truths, the conscious and manipulative closing down of participatory space and voice gathered steam, consistently 'replaced' with elitist and enclosed structures, invited spaces, securitised politics, secretive deals as well as unilateral decision-making. But, instead of acceptance and silence, there was instead rising protest and dissent from 'outside' the confined structures and spaces.

This politically and organisationally motivated closing down of institutional (democratic) spaces for participation and voice was, and largely remains, driven by the ANC



Shooting the messengers

From the early 2000s onwards, a new collection of community organisations and social movements rose up in resistance to the neoliberal ‘storm’ and creeping authoritarian politics. The formation of these organisations and movements was a direct, popular response not just to the manipulation and closing down of democratic spaces, but to what was seen and experienced as the failure of the

From the early 2000s onwards, a new collection of community organisations and social movements rose up in resistance to the neoliberal ‘storm’ and creeping authoritarian politics.

ANC and state to deliver on political and electoral promises, as well as the growing intolerance for debate and criticism. There was little other choice than a turn to mass mobilisation and protest.

The immediate response of the political and economic elites was to portray the movements and their activists as ‘criminals’ and ‘anarchists’, rather than as concerned and frustrated people

making use of the only avenues left for their grievances to be heard. When this seemed to have little effect, the state’s repressive apparatus was used to launch a co-ordinated ‘law and order’ crackdown⁶⁷ backed up by a propaganda campaign of ridicule and delegitimisation.

This approach was on full display when a collection of these movements organised a peaceful march of over 25,000 people (from the poor township of Alexandra to the ultra-rich suburb of Sandton) during the August 2002 World Summit of Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Accusing the movements of engaging in “mindless violence” and acting as “agent provocateurs”,⁶⁸ the state deployed nearly 10,000 police and army personnel on the day of the march. Despite this outrageous provocation and intimidation, the march was not only peaceful but provided affirmation of the self-organisation of the poor and marginalised.

Clearly unable to accept the reality of such democratic dissent and activity, then-President Mbeki declared that the protests were being orchestrated by “domestic and foreign left sectarian factions” and threatened to “respond in adequate measure to those who treat us as their enemy”.⁶⁹ What this (re)confirmed was the consistent historical practice of both the ANC and the state to oppose and denigrate any



socio-economic activism and political dissent that they can neither completely control or dismiss. Coupled to this, there has been the need to reassure domestic and foreign corporate capital that protests and struggles are politically peripheral and that the ANC and state can guarantee continued social and political control of workers and the poor.

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Despite these influences, from the mid-2000s onwards, in addition to the numerous industrial actions and strikes taken up by unions, there were many protests at the local community level. These revolved around issues such as inadequate basic services, the imposition of councillors, lack of democratic space and response, corruption, provincial and municipal demarcation and, to a lesser extent around internal ANC-Alliance political/factional battles. According to one multi-year academic study, the number of community protests increased by almost 150% from the period 2005-2008 to the period from 2009-2012, when they averaged 309 per year.⁷⁰

The response and actions of the police to these protests constituted, by far, the greatest source of whatever violence occurred. Hundreds of protestors and strikers were shot and injured by both the police and private security in the first 20 years of democratic rule. But it was the number of people killed during those 20 years that presents the most damning indictment. By 2015, the unofficial body count of those killed in protest actions stood at 84,⁷¹ almost all coming from the ranks of the workers and poor.

In addition, there were those thousands upon thousands arrested and charged with various 'crimes' who were denied proper legal representation and subjected to unfair trials, ill treatment and torture. Similarly, the ways in which immigrants and asylum seekers from the rest of Africa were (and continue to be) treated, resulted in mass imprisonment and deportations in direct violation of the constitutional rights afforded to everyone, regardless of citizenship and racial or national identity.

All of this was clearly of little concern to those with political and economic power. Soon after a series of large-scale and mostly peaceful protests by university



students and workers under the banners of 'Fees Must Fall/Outsourcing Must Fall' that took place across the country in 2015, both the police and then-President Zuma resorted to labelling the protests as the work of an unnamed 'third force'.

Low-intensity democracy and electoral politics

The 1994 democratic breakthrough was part of a new wave of 'democratisation' that swept across the globe in the context of the downfall of both 'left' authoritarian and commandist states in the Soviet Union/Eastern Europe and right-wing/military dictatorships in Asia and Latin America. However, in most if not all of these cases the new 'democracies' "preserved old political and economic structures from the authoritarian past". Despite the formalisation of institutions of democracy, there was a failure to "broaden popular political participation" beyond the electoral form and, thus, also to fundamentally confront inherited political, social and economic problems.⁷²

While elections in and of themselves are necessary in any democracy, they are not and can never be the embodiment of democratic expression. This is especially the case in capitalist societies where elections largely represent the triumph of a commodified and 'low intensity'⁷³ representative democracy that is embedded within a neo-liberal political economy. On this terrain, the simple existence and functioning of democratic institutions and processes mask the decline of meaningful participatory democracy. As a result, the political landscape rapidly becomes the

playground of elites who either possess or have access to, state power and capital.

While elections in and of themselves are necessary in any democracy, they are not and can never be the embodiment of democratic expression.

When electoral politics represents the dominant form of democratic activity, there is a privileging of the formal act of voting and its representational outcomes. In much the same way that corporate capital under neoliberalism

has reduced economic participation, possibility and representation to the 'market' in which they hold dominant power, so too is the political and social side of that equation being reduced to the electoral 'market'. This is the case across all modern



nation states, regardless of location or history. A good example of the arrogance of power that flows from this electoralism was captured by ANC leader Gwede Mantashe's statement just prior to the 2016 local government elections: "We are a majority; we should be able to take decisions and enforce them."⁷⁴

Elections in South Africa since 1994 continue to raise the question as to what kind of "majority" Mantashe and the ruling party is actually claiming. By the end of the first two decades of South Africa's democracy, the electoral house was already inhabited by a 'silent majority' that had chosen to opt out of electoral politics.⁷⁵

In many poor urban and rural communities in South Africa, it has been through the activities of community organisations, social movements and often spontaneous 'uprisings' that an increasing number of people experience and practice meaningful, participatory democracy. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the impact and popularity of daily 'bread-and-butter' issues and struggles were, and remain, directly linked to the disastrous impacts on the poor majority of neo-liberal policies that have been adopted and implemented by the very politicians that are elected to supposedly represent that majority.

The fact is that since the holding of the first democratic (national) elections in April 1994, besides the more specific decline in electoral support for the ANC, there has been an overall decrease in the number of people voting in elections. Numerous electoral analysts, political commentators and politicians have tried to present this as an inevitable and almost welcome development in the maturing of South Africa's democracy, referencing similar patterns of decreasing voter participation in 'developed' countries. However, the reality is that this decline has very little to do with democracy becoming more mature. Rather, it has everything to do with the combined effects, on the majority of South Africans, of neo-liberal policies and an arrogant and corrupt exercising of power. The ANC's gradual but steady loss of electoral support confirms this.

A look at the relevant percentages/numbers from each national election in the 20-year period of 1994-2014 tells the story,⁷⁶ while noting that as is the general case globally, the overall number of voters at the local level has been consistently lower than at the national level. The extent of declining voter participation becomes even more obvious when considering that the population of South Africa increased from just over 40 million in 1996 to almost 52 million in 2011, the year when a national census was taken.⁷⁷



1994: Of 23,063,910 eligible voters, **85.53%** (19,726,610) voted while the remaining 14.47% (3,337,300) stayed away. The ANC received support from 53.01% (12,237,655) of the eligible voting population.

1999: Of 25,411,573 eligible voters, **62.87%** (15,977,142) voted while the remaining 37.13% (9,434,431) stayed away. The ANC received support from 41.72% (10,601,330) of the eligible voting population.

2004: Of 27,994,712 eligible voters, **55.77%** (15,612,671) voted while the remaining 44.23% (12,382,041) stayed away. The ANC received support from 38.87% (10,880,917) of the eligible voting population.

2009: Of 30,224,145 eligible voters, **59.29%** (17,919,966) voted while the remaining 40.71% (12,304,179) stayed away. The ANC received support from 38.55% (11,650,748) of the eligible voting population.

2014: Of 31,434,035 eligible voters, **59.34%** (18,654,457) voted while the remaining 40.66% (12,779,578) stayed away. The ANC received support from 36.39% (11,436,921) of the eligible voting population.

This is quite an amazing ‘storyline’ with two key themes. During a 20-year period when the eligible voting population increased by 8.4 million, the amount of that population which chose not to vote increased by 9.4 million. Simultaneously, electoral support for the ANC, as a percentage of that voting population, declined from 53% to 36%.

One of the main reasons why the full content of this ‘story’ has been largely untold is because the official version conveniently ignores primarily those citizens (a majority of whom are young people between the ages of 18-25) who have not registered to vote, and secondarily, those who have registered but chosen not to vote. As a result, the generally accepted version of South Africa’s electoral results is portrayed as one in which there is a ‘high voter turnout’ and where successive ANC victories are presented as being indicative of support from the ‘majority of voters’.

This is how the almost 13 million people who decided not to participate in the 2014 elections have been effectively airbrushed from the picture, while the 11.5 million who voted for the ANC became ‘the people’. It is this kind of ‘story telling’ that



reinforces two of the most enduring myths in post-apartheid South Africa: a) that voting is the essence of democratic participation and 'citizenship'; and b) that the ANC's electoral triumphs are representative, in the words of ex-President Zuma, of "the will of all the people".⁷⁸

And what does this largely hidden tale tell us about the state of South Africa's political system and, more broadly, of its democracy? It tells us that a significant portion of the adult (voting age) population, but concentrated amongst

the youth, has become alienated from the political system. Since the act of voting is itself representative of either a belief in/ acceptance of, the existing order and/ or that meaningful change can result from such an act, the counter-act of not voting can be seen as representative of the opposite. In other words, there is no necessary connection between voting and the deepening of democracy in ways that can make a systemic difference in the lives of those who feel and experience exclusion and marginalisation (i.e., the broad working class, especially women).

These truths speak to the refusal to recognise that the conditions for meaningful and popular democratic participation are embedded in changing the structural relations of power, whether grounded in social, economic, political, gender or knowledge relations. The core of the problem of the rise of non-participation in the electoral process lies in the crisis that is low-intensity neo-liberal democracy.

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Langa, Cape Town. 2019.
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THE INHERITANCES OF THE FIRST 20 YEARS

Combined and uneven development

Over the last 20 years, one of the dominant arguments related to South Africa's transition has become one where the political 'side' is not the real issue; all we need, this perspective believes, is better policies and more capable and honest leaders. Rather, the argument goes, it is the economic 'side' that is the inherited and ongoing problem. As such, despite the efforts by the ruling ANC and the state it runs, the "failure" to bring about "substantial, real change",⁷⁹ is not really the ANC/state's fault because they have been hamstrung from the beginning and have been doing what they can, where they can.

Linked to this is the 'balance of forces' argument which explains the divided (political-economic) macro-frame by reference to "the extent that the overall balance of forces allowed".⁸⁰ This is consistent with a pre-determined view of human development because it gives these 'balance of forces' an almost closed character that relegates actual struggle and human agency to the realm of minor influence. It is the same as how capitalist ideologues give 'agency' to the 'free market'. In other words, this argument suggests, the extent to which there can be economic growth depends on what the 'free market' allows.

What these lines of arguments propose is that the main explanation for both the embrace of neoliberalism and the continued dominance of corporate capital, is to be found in the 'objective realities' of the pre-1994 era. Such a rationale can only be taken seriously if one accepts that the sole realistic choice was (and is) to accept the existing 'balance of forces' and then try and radically change/overturn



that balance through accessing and being incorporated into the very political and socio-economic system that frames and sustains that same balance. This is both theoretical nonsense and a practical impossibility.

All we have to do for confirmation is to open our eyes as wide as we can and take a critical look at the broad, collective character of contemporary South African society and development. In doing so, we will be able to see what the first 20 years of South Africa's 'liberation' has really produced, what kind of house has been built.

The results of class warfare

The political, social and economic realities of the first 20 years for the majority of people in South Africa provide more than enough evidence to show that a distinctly narrow nationalism combined with a deracialised capitalist neoliberalism have completely failed, in the words of the Freedom Charter, to "meet the aspirations of exploited and oppressed people." As the celebrated African American writer and poet, James Baldwin, once stated: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."⁸¹

What we must 'face' is the main reality that frames that failure: namely, that capitalist neoliberalism's political, social and ideological understanding of, and practical approach to, development and democracy was accepted and institutionalised by the ANC/state right from the start. This has provided the foundation for societal relations to increasingly be dominated by ideas based on the love of self, power and money.

As has been the case across most of the globe, in South Africa the capitalist class and allied political elites who drive the party-state-capital matrix of power and privilege have been waging an unrelenting and unrepentant class war on workers and the poor.

As has been the case across most of the globe, in South Africa the capitalist class and allied political elites who drive the party-state-capital matrix of power and privilege have been waging an unrelenting and unrepentant class war on workers and the poor. One does not have to be a radical activist, socialist or communist to grasp this reality. None other than one of the world's wealthiest people, US capitalist Warren Buffet,



was honest enough to understand why it is that he and his ilk are so rich and, correspondingly, why the vast majority of humanity is now more than ever under their jackboot. During a TV interview in 2011, the uber-wealthy Buffet said what every worker and poor person already knows from experience: “There’s been class warfare going on for the last 20 years, and my class has won.”⁸²

The wreckage of that war in South Africa has been there for all to see for some time.

- More and more people (mostly black and poor) losing their jobs and homes and being forced into whatever precarious work they can find or create just to survive;
- An entire generation of youth cast aside as surplus to the needs of the capitalist market;
- Students walking long distances to get to understaffed, poorly equipped public schools;
- Forgotten rural communities with few public services barely scratching out a living on barren and poisoned land;
- Poor inner-city residents crammed 20 to a room in hellhole flats;
- Shack cities arising across the land where children play in open sewerage, residents breathe in toxic air and people scavenge in rubbish dumps so they won’t starve.

The ‘losers’ in this war are simply told to ‘get on with it’, to embrace and even celebrate their continued desperation and marginalisation and, of course, to be grateful for the crumbs they are thrown from the ‘master’s’ table.

Meanwhile, the ‘rainbow nation’ political and economic elites occupy centre stage, figuratively and literally gorging themselves. Either secure in their inherited and/or shareholder wealth, or

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in protected jobs with massive salaries and all sorts of outrageous perks, the elites can:

- Choose from the ever-expanding range of self-contained luxury housing/ golf/eco' estates and gated 'communities' where prices start around several million Rand;
- Indulge in various extravagant dining experiences and then burn off all that rich food and expensive alcohol at private gyms and exclusive 'lifestyle centres';
- Send their kids to elitist private schools that costs tens of thousands a month;
- Enjoy immediate and high-tech medical care at exclusive private hospitals and clinics;
- Parade around in a range of outrageously expensive luxury vehicles;
- Jet off to various luxury holiday destinations across the globe to 'get away from it all' when they become tired of complaining about the 'tough' conditions in South Africa

The painful truth (for some) is that South African society is one in which there are 'world class' salaries, housing, land ownership, education, recreational facilities, general lifestyles and wealth accumulation for the few, side-by-side with 'world class' joblessness, shack settlements, landlessness, poor schooling, environmental degradation, poverty and inequality for the many. Just like the ANC councillor who told poor fishermen in Durban that they were "too dirty" to fish on the city's beachfront piers during the 2010 Soccer World Cup,⁸³ the elites only want to use the workers and the poor for their own self-interests: to work for and service them, swell the ranks of their organisations, attend their events and rallies when needed, and vote for them come election time. Otherwise, they do not really want to deal with them and, once their usefulness is exhausted, they want the workers and poor to disappear and keep quiet.

At a larger level, intensified class and racial divisions are now coming to the surface with a vengeance. Similar to the security walls, electric fences and barbed wire erected in wealthy neighbourhoods and around state buildings, the walls between the haves and have-nots, between white and black, between national and non-national are getting wider and higher. This constructed division and inequality has, over the years, increasingly fed a constructed competition amongst the poor, which



takes form in xenophobia/Afrophobia, ethnic tensions and geopolitical conflict over scarce resources and location. At the heart of all this are ruling party politicians, state officials as well as big and small capitalists whose own greedy politics is fed by such division and conflict amongst the majority.

In turn, general levels of criminal activity are on the rise. At the front of the criminal queue are those in/with power from both the old and new set of elites, from within the ANC/state as well as throughout the corporate sector. Their crimes affect both individuals and larger collectives, can destroy entire communities and bring the national economy to its knees. But because their kinds of crime are often indirect, hidden behind layers of privilege, protection and insider deal-making and their victims are most often workers and the poor, it goes on largely unnoticed and unpunished.

This has helped to entrench a culture of impunity from the law and democratic accountability. The gang of elites that have dominated South Africa's political and economic realms want power without responsibility. Like spoiled children, they always want everyone to listen to them, to be the centre of attention and are constantly demanding affirmation. All the while, though, they refuse to take responsibility for actions, words and events that flow from their personal and/or collective positions of power. What we have is a politics of, 'do what I say, not what I do'.

The gang of elites that have dominated South Africa's political and economic realms want power without responsibility.

A similar culture pervades the world of corporate capital. Massive fraud and bribery is put down to the 'costs of doing business', while criticisms of outrageous pay/perk packages to corporate executives are arrogantly dismissed. At the same time, many corporations/large businesses are squeezing already desperate employees and destroying the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers and their families through cynical, profit-maximising mass retrenchments, casualisation and capital flight.

However, when it comes to those (mostly black and poor) who have been tossed aside as little more than excess waste and left to survive by whatever means, their crimes are most often treated as acts of personal, class and racial warfare and divorced from structural, socio-economic, political and cultural context and impact.



Continuities of (colonial) power

There is an under-recognised yet common thread running through all ex-national liberation movements (NLMs) that came to political power across southern Africa after protracted struggles against colonialism. They have all, in one form or another, reproduced and then refashioned the elitist, narrowly nationalistic, parasitic and authoritarian colonial heritage of power.

While varying in degrees of intensity and timing of application, this has resulted in a gradual but systematic side-lining of a competing lineage of power emanating from the mass of people who actually constituted the liberation movement. That lineage is one that is anti-colonial, independent, liberatory and democratic in both thought and practice and whose promise was, and remains, one of revolutionary (systemic) political, social, economic and cultural change.

The generalised 'triumph' of the colonial lineage has thus produced a situation in which the ex-NLMs have become the main vehicles for exercising a refashioned political power that reproduces the systemic economic and social power of the colonial past. Rather than acting as a political vehicle for transforming and then transcending that power, they have instead politically legitimised and reinforced it. Given that the ex-NLMs accessed power in a continental and global context of highly unequal power relations, with corporate capital at the economic summit,

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these acts of political legitimisation also legitimised the acceptance of a second-class, rent-seeking status where African elites outsource the country's resources and themselves to external political and economic elites.

In South Africa, the ANC's role as the new political landlords was thus directly tied to the acceptance of the role of the old, colonial economic landlords, whose baggage was also loaded with colonial

psychological and social orders. Thus, the struggle to 'de-colonise' does not simply have to do with deracialisation and overcoming the historically oppressive role of constructed racial identities, division and inequality that were at the heart



of the apartheid colonial system. It is just as much about the conceptualisation, conscientisation and practice of power that is realised through an array of means, whether they be economic, racial, ethnic, religious, coercive, institutional, political, sexual or gendered.

The continuities of that power have allowed for the continuation of colonisation as part of individual and collective consciousness. What has happened in South Africa is that the one component of that colonisation, the institutionalised oppression of the black majority by the white minority came to a formal end, but the power matrix and broader social relations that underpinned it did not.

The other lived components of colonisation were transferred onto the new terrain of South Africa's post-apartheid 'liberation'. These include, among others: unequal gender relations; the character, content and exercise of political power; hostility to critical thought and dissent; social intolerance and bigotry; and capitalist relations of production and distribution.

If it is only the racial component of colonisation that is seen as the sole essence of colonial power, then all of the other components will remain and be further pursued, institutionalised and absorbed. That is, a deracialisation of colonial power alone cannot transform the matrix of capitalist, colonial power as a whole precisely because its other components have simply changed hands. Decolonisation requires a systemic struggle against all of its components.

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Rotten foundations

Despite a socially progressive constitution, associated legislation and consistent claims of a human-rights centred governance, the first 20 years of rule by the ANC/ state has nurtured and fed a (re)turn to narrow, socially conservative and politically reactionary national, racial, class, ethnic, gender, sexual and religious identities and social relations. The intensified inequalities, socio-economic conflict, widespread social dysfunction and 'internalised' violence that continues to spread across large swathes of South African society is not simply, as the elites and chattering classes would have it, a matter of bad individuals doing bad things.



Besides the increasing prevalence of narrow-minded patriarchal social relations and ongoing displays of general indifference to the epidemic of violence against women, another tragic form of social intolerance has been homophobia. As Horace Campbell argues, the hatred of homosexuals is to be found in the intersection

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of race, class, gender and sexual oppression and homophobic speech and actions cannot be separated from economic exploitation, sexism, violence, the oppression of women and militarism.⁸⁴

Such inward turns towards socially reactionary/conservative beliefs and practices, towards various political and social 'fundamentalisms', towards the increasing worship of individualism and bling-bling lifestyles are being increasingly facilitated by religious con

men and women, including politicians. Most often using the name of whatever Gods they believe in as legitimating cover, we are now witnessing a surge in religious and/or 'culturally' enforced patriarchy, self-constructed moralising against 'unnatural' social relations, hypocritical repression of sex and sexuality, and the exclusionary politics of racial, ethnic and national chauvinism.

There is also a greater push to embrace a male-dominated, socially reactionary rural politics. Together with mining capital in particular, the ANC/state and 'traditional authorities' have come to form a powerful and noxious political and socio-economic force that embraces patriarchy and relies on corruption, co-option, repression, and patronage as well as human and environmental exploitation as the main drivers of a retrogressive 'development' model.

This 'model' does not only apply to the domestic terrain but also in the arena of foreign policy. The dominant thrust and purpose of South Africa's post-1994 foreign policy has been to facilitate the longer-term economic (class) interests of a (new and old) South African capitalist elite. Tied to this has been the ANC/state's consistent desire to consolidate its sub-imperial role as the main African driver of both a regional and continental capitalist political economy.⁸⁵ On the economic front this has meant the championing of neoliberal 'Free Trade Agreements' and bi-lateral



agreements with specific nations. This has opened up virtually unhindered paths for South African and international corporate capital to further exploit the continent's natural and human resources and to assist in undermining local production and industry through mergers/acquisitions and monopoly 'investment'.⁸⁶

On the political front, it has meant political support to and from, as well as general international solidarity with, authoritarian states coupled to turning a blind eye to massive human rights abuses. Combined, this foreign policy approach has helped create and actively assist in, the exploitation and displacement of other African 'nationalities', many of whom have not surprisingly made their way to South Africa. Once here, the vast majority (who are poor) have consistently been treated as if they are criminals and chancers intent on destroying the imagined 'national community' of 'authentic' South Africans. In turn this has led to the widespread criminalisation of African immigrants and, thus, contributed substantially to their parallel illegalisation in the eyes of both the 'law' and amongst many with whom they live.

Those with political and economic power now more than ever, pick and choose which aspects of democracy apply to them and what parts of the democratic process they want the rest of society to enjoy. The terrain of genuine participatory democracy has all but been laid to waste and politically manipulated, with the result that the ANC/state is steadily losing political authority and popular support. Increased control of information, a generalised lack of regulation, a thinly disguised contempt for democratic oversight and equal application of the law as well as intensified securitisation of state and society; all these have become the hallmarks of contemporary South Africa.

Even more fundamentally, there is clearly a gathering crisis when it comes to the underlying principles, ethics and collective approach necessary for meaningful democratic governance and leadership. As with so many other NLMs in the region in the decades following political independence, South Africa has been witnessing the rise of a politics of arrogance and (elite) entitlement to rule, a drive to maintain power whatever the cost.

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But this is not the sole preserve of the ANC/state since they share their power with corporate capital. Within the exclusive ranks of the filthy rich, huge amounts of time and energy continue to be spent propagating their 'entitlement' to their ill-gotten wealth and consequent power to 'call the shots' on the economic front. Like the ANC on the political side of the tracks, they too believe in some sort of God (market)-given right to forever lord it over the 'masses', whilst predictably telling everyone else that it is not them but workers and the poor who have a 'culture of entitlement'. Such messianic delusions have their base origins in the core nature of the colonial state and society.⁸⁷ In the memorable words of South African writer Njabulo Ndebele, "The more that power yields material gratifications of all kinds, the deeper grows the impulse to hold on to it."⁸⁸

The post-apartheid house that was built in the first 20 years remains embedded – regardless of the letter of the law and the promises of parts of the constitution – on rotten structural foundations.

Despite this, significant sections of the mass of ordinary workers and the poor who inhabit the house that is South Africa, continue to dare believe that it still remains possible to tear down the internal walls of fear, hatred and division, rip the heart out of those structural foundations and remake the house.



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