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THE TREASURE IN STILFONTEIN HOW THE STATE TOOK A CHANCE TO PLUG THE HOLE

by July Eccles

When you hear the word "Zama Zama", what springs to mind? Probably an African man dressed in dusty rags, his face hidden by a scarf or a balaclava, scraping rocks from the depths of the earth, in search of specks of gold or other minerals. For others, it is synonymous with criminal syndicates who sport AK-47s and rule townships with an iron fist.

Zama Zama's have been so dehumanised, otherised and scapegoated by the rest of society that we don't recognise them for who they really are: fathers and brothers sacrificing themselves to try and feed their families; men with little to no socio-economic power who struggle for survival. Amongst Zama Zama are women who crush the rocks brought up from underground, a back-breaking physical labour that is often overlooked. But the fantasies conjured up against Zama Zamas in the collective imagination of South Africans have reached genocidal levels.

The cassis belli for the state's war on the Zama Zama was the tragic murder of eight young women in Krugersdorp (Johannesburg) during the filming of a music video in 2022. The women had been sexually brutalised before being killed. Initially, Zama Zama were blamed for the crime, but it was later revealed that the perpetrators were among the video's crew, with some evidence pointing to a local police officer. Despite their exoneration, the public's rage had already been unleashed and the state seized the opportunity to intensify its crackdown on informal miners, branding them as criminals.

Shaft 11 – a deathtrap and a lifeline

In and around November 2024, the world became aware of a crisis in Stilfontein, North West. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of zama-zama miners had been trapped in a shaft underground. It was known as Shaft 11 of the Buffelsfontein Gold Mine, a monstrous two kilometers deep, where miners were stationed at 1.6 and 1.7 kilometers without food, medicine, or potable water.

Usually when human beings are trapped somewhere without sustenance, the whole world reacts swiftly – news stations rush to the scene and governments spring into action. But while the issue got some national and international news coverage, the South African government remained indifferent. In fact, it was with unmistakable glee that Minister Ntshavheni pronounced that they would not send food, water or help of any kind to "criminals".

The miners, predominantly poor African migrants from neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Mozambique, were labeled as criminals simply for seeking survival. This rhetoric ignored the fact that the real criminality in the mining industry lies with the buyers and traders who exploit these desperate workers, not the miners themselves. The choice to work in such deadly conditions – where many have plunged to their deaths – should have been evidence enough of their desperation.

The courage of the community of Khuma

What emerged next were videos of a single rope, supported by a hand-made pulley system, dangling over the sheer hole of the shaft.



Volunteers from the nearby community of Khuma would pull this rope for hours at a time, until someone or something emerged. On a good afternoon, it would be a living person, emaciated, wasted away and bewildered by the blinding light. On a bad one, it would be a corpse. Either way, volunteers could hardly send enough food and water to keep people alive using this rope, and it would take months, if not years, to rescue everyone. Various activist formations, NGOs and community groups joined in and threw their full solidarity behind the miners, but it was not enough – time was running out.

An underground extermination camp

Shaft 11 had turned from a crisis into a concentration camp, and then into a deliberate, calculated extermination camp, filled with people starving to death and dying of dehydration, while dozens of cops stood around the mouth of the shaft, berating humanitarians, activists and community members who insisted on sending down food.

Vala Umgodi (Plug the Hole)

Early in 2024, the South African Police Service, under Minister Mchunu, had decided to crack down on what they deemed as illegal mining, but what is more accurately described as informal or artisanal mining. Not all informal mining is illegal, because when shafts are abandoned, there is no trespassing or theft taking place. Yet, every news agency repeatedly called the miners "illegal miners", further cementing already dangerous entrenched stereotypes about Zama Zamas where literally the term just means "take a chance" derived from the Zulu word "ukuzama" meaning "to try".

This crackdown took the form of blocking all food, water, medicine and supplies until miners would be forced to come out of the shaft. It is not remotely conceivable that such an operation could be legal under South African law, because Section 27(1)(b) of the Constitution states that, "everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food and water." It is ironic that SAPS carried out a clear, deliberate plan violating the law, in the name of upholding the law. It exposed a fundamental tenement of capitalist societies: Police exist to protect capital and property rights at any cost, including the destruction of human life.

So extreme is this impetus that the mere hint

of a threat was enough for the state to carry out a slow massacre in this instance. It was less about the theft of minerals and more about poor, African migrants exercising agency, taking matters into their own hands and solving their own problems. The capitalist establishment wish instead for them to be eternally subjugated and exploited.

The failure of media

While by and large media organisations were present and heard both sides of the story, their repeated use of the term "illegal miners" in every headline was like a red meat to the most xenophobic layers of the country. It's important to point out that xenophobia originates in the history of white supremacy that plagues this country and continent. During Apartheid, the white government was paranoid about the influx of African migrants who would 'overwhelm' the white population. Furthermore, the Eurocentric view of South Africa as a supreme nation on the continent persists to this day.

But the most epic failure of the media was not to emphasise the reality that the miners could not leave. The word "trapped" did not pierce the collective consciousness of viewers. News anchors and journalists did not spend significant time describing the reality of the shaft, its staggering dimensions, how miners found themselves there, or the conditions they were enduring. Instead they latched onto sensationalist details, like requests for tomato sauce and mayonnaise, written meticulously on scraps of paper. The survivors later explained that these items were high in calories, and that one could survive for a whole day on a single spoonful of them. The instant porridge which was being sent down was impossible for many of the starved people to ingest and they would easily throw up, indicating possible symptoms of refeeding syndrome, a deadly condition.

Finally, in early January 2025, a plea to the Pretoria High Court by Zinzi Tom, whose brother was trapped underground, delivered a favourable outcome for the miners. Judge Ronel Tolmay insisted the rescue happen immediately. Tragically, Ayanda Tom, Zinzi's brother, was never found.

Continues on page 2

EDITORIAL

Mandla Charles and Mzwandile Mkwai.

Let me say that again.

Mandla Charles and Mzwandile Mkwai. These men are heroes. These are names that should be recorded in our histories to attest to the sheer love and courage that humanity can display in contrast to all the names of the fascists and patriarchal warmongers and dirty politicians that mainstream media spews in our faces 24/7.

Yet, average human beings with no status in society, in fact, volunteers out of the prison-rehabilitation system, chose to do and achieved what no other professional whose duty it is, dared to do. In our lead article, July Eccles reveals the gruesome narrative of the mine-rescue down shaft 11 in the Stilfontein mining tragedy, where the SA state, rescue services and SAPS let 87 people die a slow death while the country believed in 2012 that the killing of 36 miners was to be remembered as the biggest post-apartheid disaster. The difference? The miners in Stilfontein were not South African. Remember Stilfontein is not becoming a national and international cry for solidarity as in South Africa, migrant lives mean next to nothing.

Similarly, while the South African state leads in the ICJ case against Apartheid Israel and send shiploads of coal to fuel their genocide and ecocide on Palestinian land, the country, is not standing still when the effects are clearly spiraling back home to raise taxes for the poor and where electricity and water is the average South African's struggle. Roshan Dadoo tells of this contradiction on page 3.

In our gender section, (page 4) Lara Reddy writes about the complex Syrian landscape, an issue that has been playing out in the media since the fall of the Baath regime last year. She writes from a feminist perspective, highlighting the work and demands of the Syrian Women's Council and a message concerning the new interim constitution of Syria with a stark warning.

In our struggle section on page 5, Anastasya Eliseeva and Naomi Betana outlines the actions, campaigns, and organising that Witzenberg Justice Coalition led and then won against the Western Cape Education Department's ridiculous and dangerous decision to cut school transport to the children of Vrededorp. It is a win for WJC worth noting and their persistence in the struggle for working class upliftment is encouraging in very dark times.

This year began with the great loss of comrade Mark Thabo Weinberg, a familiar name in South Africa, a dedicated activist with a long tradition of left-wing activism. This, while we were still mourning the loss of dear comrade Prishani Naidoo last December. Dale McKinley, long-time friend and comrade celebrates her life and speaks to the contributions she made to our struggles on page 6. The Yetu Collective wrote an obituary to Mark and did justice to a life that certainly did justice to our working-class struggles. What is usually our poetry page 8 is replaced with the obituary to Mark, whose life was a revolutionary poem born in the apartheid struggle, as was Prishani's. Hamba Kahle comrades.

Finally, Toolshed X Camp created our pull-out poster, titled Khuma Shows Us the Way" that makes up page 2 and 7 to tell the story of the Stilfontein miners. While times may seem at its darkest, heroes do pop up to attest to the potential of humans long forgotten to love and care for each other with an unmatched courage. Hamba Kahle to the Stilfontein miners we lost and thank you to the community of Khuma that showed us the way.

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times."
— Bertolt Brecht

For comments to the Editor, letters, articles, or artwork, contact Lara Reddy - lara@ilrig.org.za

PULL-OUT POSTER

ON LAST PAGE

"Khuma shows us the way"
by Toolshed X Camp

MAKE ISRAEL PALESTINE AGAIN!

SOUTH AFRICAN COAL FUELS ISRAEL'S GENOCIDE IN GAZA

ENERGY EMBARGO NOW!

by Roshan Dadoo

On 9th March Israel declared it was cutting electricity supplies to Gaza. This is yet another breach of the ceasefire agreement that has seen at least 116 Palestinians killed and 490 wounded since it came into effect on 19 January 2025. Power has been cut to the only remaining water desalination plant supplying water to Palestinians facing ongoing genocide in Gaza.

South Africa continues to export coal to the Israel Electric Corporation, almost entirely owned by the State of Israel, and the main generator, supplier and distributor of electricity throughout occupied Palestine. On 11 February 2025 the ship 'Cape Friendship' arrived in Israel's Hadera port carrying around 700,000 tonnes of South African coal from Richards Bay.

Coal-fired power plants at Ashdod and Hadera ports in 2023 provided 17.5% of power to a grid that supplies the Israel Occupation Forces, weapons and ammunition manufacture, as well as to the illegal West Bank settlements. 'Settlement outposts', set up by illegal settlers stealing Palestinian land and putting up temporary structures are now being connected to the Israel national electricity grid even before they are authorised by the state. Meanwhile Israel sells electricity to the Palestinian Authority at a higher tariff.

A county and apex court of appalling contradictions

It is unconscionable that South Africa continues to fuel the genocide and illegal occupation, sustaining the system of apartheid and Israel's settler-colonial regime. It was South Africa's case against Israel under the Genocide Convention at the International Criminal Court (ICC) that brought about the very legal obligations imposed on state parties and on corporations to prevent and end complicity in the genocide.

In July 2024, the same apex court ordered states to "aid or assist in maintaining the situation created by Israel's illegal presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory." In the United Nations General Assembly on September 18 2024, a super-majority vote (124 in favour including South Africa, 14 against, and 43 abstentions) confirmed that states have an obligation to "prevent trade or investment

relations that assist in the maintenance of the illegal situation created by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory."

Hague Group pledges no docking for ships carrying military gear to Apartheid Israel

On 31 January 2025 South Africa was at the forefront of the inauguration of the Hague Group of states along with Bolivia, Republic of Colombia, Republic of Cuba, Republic of Honduras, Malaysia, Republic of Namibia and the Republic of Senegal. Their statement pledged to: "prevent the docking in any port... where there is a clear risk of the vessel being used to carry military fuel and weaponry to Israel." This is a significant move on the part of global south countries, committing to concrete actions, including ending coal exports that fuel Israel's military industrial complex. It is vital that countries stand together in solidarity with the Palestinian people against US imperialism and withstand the bullying threats of Donald Trump's racist regime.

A plea to unite our struggles against Glencore and Rainbow to end an ecocide

South Africans therefore have a specific responsibility to ensure our government and mining companies like Glencore and African Rainbow Minerals stop trading with Israel. We can only do this by uniting our struggles. As an example, Israel is not only committing genocide in Palestine but also what Palestinians have called 'ecocide'. The first 120 days of the genocide produced more CO2 than the annual emissions of 26 countries and territories. The CO2 emissions that will be produced during the rebuilding of Gaza's devastated urban landscape will produce a figure higher than that of over 130 countries. Palestinians recognise that their struggle is inextricably linked with climate justice, exploitation and other forms of oppression across the world. They call for broad intersectional coalitions as a necessity for Palestinian solidarity, particularly in these times of rising fascism, white supremacy, and systemic racism.



The South African BDS Coalition along with the global BDS Movement, the energy embargo campaign and the Resist Glencore Network bring together Palestine solidarity groups, environmental justice activists, indigenous people's rights, mining affected communities, trade unions and all those that are fighting against the rapacious hand of late neo-liberal racial capital and planetary destruction. Join us in taking collective action to stop South African coal fuelling the genocide, for an energy embargo, trade and economic sanctions towards dismantling Israel's system of apartheid and its settler colonial regime. Resist. Rise. Decolonize. Palestine Frees Us All!

Roshan Dadoo is the convenor of the South African BDS Coalition - the umbrella body for Palestinian solidarity groups in South Africa



Photos by Sunny Morgan, at Energy embargo protest in Johannesburg

THE TREASURE IN STILFONTEIN - continued from page 1:

African heroes: Mandla and Mzwandile

The miners were rescued by two community volunteers, Mandla Charles and Mzwandile Mkwai, after the state finally allowed rescue machinery on site. For three days they filled the lift with both living and dead bodies. No Mine Rescue Service employee, no police, no one from the Department of Health and no member of the state was willing to enter the shaft. Underground, survivors rushed at the two men, begging to be let up the lift which could only take 7 people at a time. So thin were the men that the two volunteers loaded 14 at a time instead of 7. At the end of the operation, 246 survivors were rescued and 78 bodies were retrieved, but countless other bodies remain in the hellish depths underground.

Aftermath of the rescue

Today, the survivors are still not safe. They languish in overcrowded prisons due to their migrant status, while Stilfontein at large and Khuma in particular, are still reeling from this ongoing

nightmare. The wives, girlfriends, children and family members of the miners are left without the financial support the men provided. More importantly, having had a loved one ripped away so violently by starvation and death, or waiting for them to be released from a cell is taking an enormous psychological toll the community. The people of Khuma have shown almost superhuman resilience in the face of such a vicious onslaught against their kin, but they have been hit by a bomb of poverty, anguish and psychological turmoil.

Elsewhere across the country, Vala Umgodi took place unabated and it is not clear how many miners were killed by police in the process. Stilfontien was unique because the community was courageous enough to stand up to the police and demand that their kin be rescued.

This is not a sign of a community that fears Zama Zamas but one that needs them. In moments like this, it is wise for us to reflect on how the material realities of our day-to-day lives are

inextricably bound with our spiritual connection to each other as human beings.

This is why Mandla Charles declared proudly that he will wear the badge of his profession with pride - "I Am Zama Zama", a slogan that fittingly means trying, now against all odds, and resonates with struggles across time and space. This struggle is far from over.

July Eccles is a member of the Stilfontein Solidarity Committee.

Special acknowledgement goes to the survivors, the affected families and the Stilfontein Solidarity Committee made up of the community leaders of Khuma, MACUA, SANCO, LHR, SAJFP, GIWUSA, Save Our Sacred Lands, NAAM, WASP, SA BDS Coalition, Visual Intifada, Potch4Palestine, Foundation for Human Rights, CAMP, KAAX and various other organisations and individuals.

If you would like to donate to the Stilfontein relief fund - use the link below or scan the QR code

Link: bit.ly/stilfontein





SYRIAN WOMEN'S COUNCIL LEADS THE CALL FOR AN AUTHENTICALLY DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY ROOTED IN A FREE LIFE

Much of leftist society has by now heard of the romance of Rojava. I use this term romance to integrate the often-limited ways in which colonialist society has shaped the narratives of another people's struggle, steeped in the present revolutionary moment where only those whose frames of reference understand as it has been noted by many in the middle eastern mindset that we may as well be in the third world war in the Levant and beyond. If any concrete idea of Rojava exists that must be sustained at every revolutionary moment, as this one in the fall of the Baath regime, it is the realisation that if the women have not attained liberation, then that revolution can never be complete or successful - it will lead to more oppression- as history has shown us.

Jineoloji guides us to a free life

In Jineoloji, the praxis is one of reclaiming 'Ourstory' which includes women and othered genders. While capitalism succeeds on the downfall, weakness and divisions it creates amongst women, Jineoloji, a radical feminism deep-rooted in sisterhood and solidarity that approaches the question of women (as the first colonised) from an anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal and scientific lens, without the positivism of general scientific and academic approaches while weaving women, ecology, democracy and aesthetics into a paradigm that succeeds in empowering women by building their confidence and giving them access to participate in society in all ways. Many societies cannot and still are aiming to come close to the organised, democratic and antipatriarchal society that the Kurds have created in the regions that make up Rojava known as the DAANES - Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria.

A threat to the foundations of women's freedom built in Rojava

There are many autonomous communities, and many layers and strands to the women's movement, linked to the broader Kurdish Freedom Movement, and simply known as the Freedom Movement-to include the thousands of internationals who are joining the struggle to work within democratic modernity, a term coined by their leader Abdula Ocalan (Apo), whose freedom after 27 years in Imrali Island prison in Turkiye for these very radical feminist ideas that he himself proposed, hangs in the balance of the fascist Turkish regime and the proxy powers and the HTS administration under Jawlani, who, not to forget are guilty of many severe crimes against women now handed executive powers in the new Islamic regime, a familiar sounding narrative playing out, with all the danger signs glaring from misogynistic and murderous Iran and genocidal, apartheid Israel.

But here, what should be the first step in the revolution, is always the last, or never happens. When we see the changes being legislated by male leaders, some elected (as in US) some unelected and unvoted for as in Syria, with violent and misogynistic pasts, suddenly have the democratic process under their control, while in the act of leaving out the women influence in the decisions, is an irony that everyone who have been having this knee-jerk reaction to the "good news" in Syria do not quite get. As South Africans, we are all too used to the rainbow nation sunglasses given to us after the release of Mandela used to shade the inequality and capitalist patriarchy that set in solidly after the fall of apartheid and the neo-liberal agenda.

While the world was looking eagerly from the typical news wrapped in ribbons and bows from

the mainstream media about the new peace and democracy in Syria post-Assad and the possible release of Ocalan with his declarum widely circulated on mainstream media, this instant-gratification response kept the public and even comrades away from the realisation of the patriarchy and dangers that the deals between the proxy-powers and HTS administration would bring.

According to the KCK (Kurdistan Women's Community), on 8 March 2025, International Women's Day statement: "In the Middle East, in Kurdistan, the philosophy of Jin Jiyan Azadi, which links the liberation of society to the liberation of women, guides the Rojava revolution and its political project. Today, this unique system, in which the autonomous women's organisation is central, is threatened by the HTS regime; The movement there is giving hope to women all over the world, while at the same time calling for global support."

In December 2024, The Syrian Women's council, a feminist umbrella body that formed on 8th September 2017 to represent all Syrian women, led by the revolutionary traditions of the Kurdish women and the ideas of Rojava issued a declaration. It was circulated to leftist internationalists, who spread it on their networks, radical women's movements, organisations, academics, activists, legal and justice representatives and individuals were signatories to the declaration for a new democratic Syria that includes women.

Declaration of Syrian Women's Council sets firm conditions for freedom

As women living in Syria, we have lived for many years under the Baath regime's nationalist and unilateralist policies that do not recognize the will of women. The peoples of Syria, who rose up against the cruel regime in 2011, have faced war, migration, occupation and ISIS persecution in the 13 years that followed. Women have suffered the most in this period.

We have struggled against the Baath regime, as well as against ISIS, and against all forms of oppression and enslavement. We have paid a high price, but we have not lost our hope to live in a free and democratic Syria. As women from all ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds in Syria, we established the Syrian Women's Counsel with the determination to build a free future for all Syrian people. Now, more than ever, we have a strong will and determination to play a more effective leadership role in this process.

Efforts to build a new order in Syria after the fall of the Baath regime continue. However, this process must recognize the will of women, a fair and equal representation of women must be ensured. Because women make up more than half of Syrian society. Only with equal participation of women and all the different religious, cultural and ethnic groups in Syria, we can build the democratic, just and secure country, we are longing for.

During these 13 years, women in North and East Syria have struggled and organized themselves in all areas of life and achieved important gains. They have gained important expertise in politics, economy, self-defense, justice and many other fields. It is time that all Syrian women can benefit from the achievements of the women in this region. These achievements have been gained with great sacrifices and great costs, so it is crucial to defend them. One of the most important conditions in the legitimation at the regional and international level of the new system that will be established in Syria, is that the role of women in establishing



Syrian women's council makes statement

and administrating the new system in Syria, is guaranteed.

The fall of the Assad regime was a positive development. However, unfortunately the crimes against women in Idlib, Afrin, Jarablus, al-Bab, Serekani and Gire Spi - like killing, abduction and deprivation of basic rights - continue. In these places, and now as well in Minbij, Turkish-backed armed groups continue to commit crimes and continue their occupation.

Today, as we celebrate the fall of the Ba'ath regime, we also witness an alarming increase in violence against women and religious and ethnic minorities—particularly Christians, Alawites, and Druze—in coastal and southern regions. Furthermore, attacks on North and East Syria and heinous crimes, such as the brutal killings and beheading of women, as occurred in Tal Rifaat, by armed factions supported by Turkey, continue. Therefore, in order to prevent these violations and to end the fear and danger our peoples are facing, we call on all political forces in Syria to work toward achieving the following objectives:

- Syrian people must determine the future of Syria.
- The fulfillment of the requirements of international norms and peace agreements; an end to war and conflicts in our region; therefore, a closure of Syrian airspace to military activities; the cessation of all attacks on Syrian territory, and the withdrawal of all occupying armies.
- The immediate release of all women still held captive in the prisons of armed groups in Idlib, Afrin, Jarablus, al-Bab, Gire Spi (Tal Abyad) and Serekaniye (Ras al-Ain).
- The establishment of a committee with the active participation of women to ensure the safe return of displaced Syrian refugees and an end to the occupation of Syrian territory.
- The ensuring of fair representation of women and women's organizations from all parts of Syria in the construction of a democratic Syria and in the new Constitutional Committee.
- The implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325; the taking of measures to guarantee women's participation in peace processes; measures to prevent conflict and measures to prevent violence against women during and after conflicts; the effective participation of women in the decision-making, implementation and accountability processes in taking these measures.
- The establishing of a truth and justice commission to investigate and prosecute all war crimes and crimes against women and human rights.
- Ensuring women's equal and free participation in all decision-making mechanisms and in the fields of politics, education, science and economy
- Legal recognition of women's right to self-defence.
- Full implementation and guarantee of the human rights proclaimed in international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). A guarantee of women's fundamental rights and social rights.
- The establishment of a committee to work for the inclusion of women's will in public and political institutions based on the principle of equal representation.
- The establishment of justice committees for children who have suffered psychological and physical harm due to war and violence.
- The establishment of an environmental committee to investigate environmental destruction, environmental crimes and to prosecute the perpetrators among other necessary measures to be taken.

Syrian Women's Council 20-12-2024

Rojava rejects the new Syrian Draft Constitution

On 15 March 2025, the Syrian Women's council issued a statement rejecting the draft constitution prepared by the Damascus government, stating it was "prepared with complete disregard for the long struggle of Syrian women against dictatorship." DAANES issued a statement that "This draft neither represents our people nor reflects the true identity of Syria" and criticised it for being very similar to the Baath regime's laws and "it is a way to weaken the efforts to establish real democracy in Syria.

Moreover, its content is completely detached from Syria and the aspirations of its people."

Internationally, it is important to not stop organising against these patriarchal forces and to continue in building strong and sustained work towards women's liberation so we can achieve an authentic revolution at last.



A street scene in the township of Vredebes, January 2025 (Photos by Anastasya Eliseeva)

SCHOOL BUSES FOR WITZENBERG: HOW A COMMUNITY WON AGAINST INJUSTICE

15 January 2025, the first day of the South African school year, is mostly a joyous day for children and parents. However, this year families in Vredebes township outside Ceres, Western Cape, faced a sudden crisis. Their children's school transport was suddenly revoked. This forced young learners—some as young as six—to walk over 4 km each way along dangerous rural roads in a region plagued by crime and Gender-Based Violence. The decision placed these children at severe risk and added another burden to an already struggling community.

A broken system built by apartheid history

The crisis in school transport is part of a broader issue in South Africa's education system, rooted in apartheid separatist development and continued under current neo-liberal state policies that prioritize corporate profits over people. Under apartheid, black, coloured and Indian students were subjected to inferior, underfunded Bantu education designed to create a cheap labour force, while white students were groomed for leadership and skilled positions. The funds allocated per African learner were less than half of the funds per white learner.

Post-apartheid, systemic inequalities persist, disproportionately impacting poor and working-class communities. The state of education is dropping. Many schools are under-staffed and 22 600 teacher positions are not filled – even though billions go to private contractors instead. Since at least 2019 the state has been cutting the amount it sends per learner to provincial departments. It seems the only way to get a decent education is through very expensive private schools, inaccessible to most of the population.

"It sounds crazy, but the way the municipality is treating our kids – it's like they're setting them up to lose in life," says Naomi Betana of the Witzenberg Justice Coalition (WJC).

A township built for workers, but forgotten in planning

Vredebes was established under the Integrated Residential Development



Melvonja Reitz with her father Jacobus Engelbrecht

Programme (IRDP) but was built nearly 5 km outside of Ceres. Instead of being integrated, the township was cut off from essential services, including schools. Initially, government-provided school buses bridged this gap. However, in early 2025, this service was revoked without notice.

"They didn't come and tell us," says Melvonja, a farm worker whose children attend Morisdale Primary. "We found out from the bus driver who said we won't get buses anymore."

When community members questioned officials, they were told the government had no obligation to provide transport.

The dangerous road to education

The alternative to school transport was a long, unsafe journey. The Witzenberg region has

high crime rates, including frequent robberies, assaults, and attacks on young girls. The expectation that children walk alone along such a road was not just unreasonable—it was reckless.

For parents working long hours on farms, escorting their children was impossible. Many elderly guardians were physically unable to make the daily trip. The walk also posed a health risk; extreme summer heat in Witzenberg could lead to heat exhaustion and sunstroke for young children walking nearly 10 km every day.

The community fights back

For this working-class community, education is not a luxury—it is one of the few opportunities for children to escape poverty. The loss of school transport threatened that opportunity.

Thembeke, a wheelchair-bound single mother of two, survives on a R2000 monthly grant. "As



Thembeke in her home

you can see," she says, gesturing to her empty home, "I don't have furniture and keep the lights off to save money. I can't afford transport."

She adds, "My daughter got her report card—she's brilliant. I want a better life for her. Our children have dreams. They must be beyond us."

Recognizing the severity of the situation, the Witzenberg Justice Coalition (WJC), a grassroots organization fighting for social justice for working class communities and women stepped in.

"We tried to address the problem in various ways," says Naomi of WJC. "We raised awareness in the community, wrote letters to the Department of Education, marched to Parliament, and created an ongoing social media campaign. We even got the mayor to come and see the situation firsthand."

The parents, led by WJC decided to get together on the first day of school and march along the road intended for school, in an effort to disrupt the traffic, make their pleas heard and apply pressure through public advocacy.

Their efforts drew attention from local media and human rights organisations, increasing pressure on officials to act.



Parents and school-children march for transport from Vredebes to Ceres

Victory for Witzenberg Justice Coalition and Vredebes but more battles ahead

After months of struggle, WJC won the case, compelling authorities to reinstate school transport. This victory proved the power of grassroots activism—when communities unite and demand justice, real change can happen.

However, this fight was just one of many struggles for Vredebes. Poorly planned housing developments without adequate infrastructure remain a widespread issue in the Western Cape. Communities continue to face inadequate healthcare, high unemployment, and limited opportunities for economic advancement.

Despite these challenges, securing school transport was a crucial step forward. Children can once again attend school safely, focusing on learning rather than the dangers involved in a long, exhausting walk.

The Witzenberg Justice Coalition remains committed to advocating for better living conditions, safer communities, and fair access to education. Their success in this case has strengthened their resolve to continue fighting for the rights of poor and working-class communities.

PRISHANI NAIDOO:

A BEAUTIFULLY DIVERSE, RADICAL AND PRINCIPLED TAPESTRY OF LIFE, THOUGHT AND STRUGGLE

by Dale McKinley

May humanity speak.

May humanity listen....

Each country,

Each city,

Each countryside,

Each house,

Each person,

Each is a large or small battleground.

On the one side is neoliberalism with all its repressive power and all its machinery of death;

On the other side is the human being.

For Prishani Naidoo every space and terrain were a battleground. But these were not battlegrounds marked by constant and constructed violence, conflict and destruction; they were rather framed by a willingness to always listen and learn, fierce but inclusive and reasoned intellectual engagements/ debates, the conscious defence and practicing of progressive principles and values and, the embracing of diverse possibilities for radical change both personal and political, specific and systemic.

Born and raised into a world of political thought and struggle

Prishani was born in 1973 in Durban but almost immediately moved to Port Shepstone where she spent her first 11 years, attending a state-aided 'Indian' school. The family then moved back to Durban in 1984 where Prishani attended the private, all-girls Catholic school of Lonsdale from which she matriculated in 1990 at the age of 17. She describes her journey of conscientisation and politicisation during those formative, early years of life:

I grew up in a family that was political ... connected politically and that was always active – many of whom were from the BC (Black Consciousness) movement ... things always being organised, fought against ... [and this was linked] to my own experience as a black South African growing up under apartheid.

Dutifully 'armed', Prishani then became involved at an organisational level in 1989 while in Standard 9. She threw her youthful energy into setting up "our own ANC branches in the Durban Western areas", soon becoming the General-Secretary of her local ANC Youth League branch and later to be, ANCYL President.

After a short 1-year stint at the University of Durban-Westville where she joined the South African National Students Congress (SANSCO - the forerunner of SASCO), Prishani moved to Johannesburg and entered Wits University. There, she ploughed through two-and-a-half years of medicine before deciding she "hated it", switching over to do a BA with English and Sociology majors, subsequently graduating in 1998 with an Honours in comparative literature.

Throughout, Prishani was active in and a leader of South African Students Congress (SASCO) as well as in the Wits Students Representative Council, describing herself "in those first few years [as] very much within the Congress tradition ... a defender of that history ... always abiding by organisational discipline, being uncritical ... until I felt my own voice completely silenced", largely as a result of her growing criticism and opposition to the implementation of the ANC-Alliance's neoliberal macro-economic policy (GEAR).

It was in those mid-late 1990s that I first met Prishani and her partner Ahmed Veriava. As I would find out later, when you saw or heard one of them, the other always seemed to be in close mental and physical proximity. At the time I was a full-time

staffer at the South African Communist Party (SACP) as well as Chairperson of the SACP Greater Johannesburg District and had come to give a talk to SASCO Wits and engage in discussion related to GEAR and working class struggles against its growing impacts.

After my relatively brief engagement with Prishani, I immediately liked her; not only was she incredibly intelligent, she was candidly and critically forthright yet in a way that made me feel as if we had been good comrades for a long time. Even if I was not her "adversary", fellow activist and close friend of Prishani's – Nicolas Dieltiens - has succinctly captured Prishani's general and unique gift: "Prishani would take on her adversaries with argument and reason when the struggle was most difficult or confrontational."

Of ideological, organisational and intellectual movements

Like many other activists on the South African 'left' during those days, Prishani soon became (in her own words) "disillusioned" with her experiences in the ANC-Alliance. She began her search for "other ways of acting politically" and seeking out new spaces for her work and activism. This saw her doing basic trade union education particularly with women, at the independent Khanya College and then becoming gender programme coordinator, first at the Heinrich Boell Foundation and back at Khanya again in the early 2000s for a short stint. For many years after, Prishani was active in the Indymedia collective and then also joined her partner Ahmed and two other comrades/friends to start a small collective – 'Research and Education in Development' – which carried out contracted research projects.

It was during these years that Prishani (along with her partner Ahmed) become actively involved in the newly formed social movement, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). Prishani threw herself into the difficult and taxing activist work of trying to help build an ideologically heterogenous, socially inclusive and radically democratic/bottom-up movement of the broad working class. Not surprisingly, she gravitated towards the educational terrain, guiding the APF research committee in producing two excellent participatory action research reports on the militant struggles of APF community affiliates against water privatisation in the form of the forced introduction of pre-paid water meters. Much of this and subsequent work within the APF against neoliberal commodification of almost everything formed the basis of Prishani's 2010 PhD thesis, entitled: 'The Making of "The Poor" in Post-apartheid South Africa: A Case Study of the City of Johannesburg and Orange Farm'.

Throughout Prishani's APF years, she consistently centred the principled practice of never taking anyone or their views for granted and never substituting others' knowledge with one's own because of educational status/level, political experience or organisational position and ideological surety. Whether in the APF or in the many other organisational, intellectual and movement spaces and places within which she was involved, Prishani always tried to consciously construct terrains of equality and respect: in her own words, "to do things differently by confronting those different positions of power, and different hierarchies".

In doing so Prishani was, in real practical terms, applying the foundational attributes of her intellectual, ideological, organisational and personal (guiding) frames. By 2008, Prishani felt the need to move onto a different terrain from which to apply those foundational frames. Even if with some serious reservations she chose the academy, becoming a lecturer in the Sociology Department at Wits University. For the next 16 years



Prishani traversed that terrain with incredible levels of energy, perseverance, acuity and passion. It is impossible to capture the subsequent scope and impact of her research, writing, teaching, activism, mentoring and leadership, but it was as impressive as it was expansive.

Besides the incredibly long list of academic and activist publications, there were many inputs, keynote speeches, colloquia and artistic collaborations. There were also constant meetings, workshops and fora with students, activists and organisations both in South Africa and internationally. This included her leading role in the 'Fees Must Fall' movement that arose at Wits and across the South African university landscape from 2014-2016.

Before she was so suddenly taken, Prishani had been completing her first full length book, 'The Subject of Poverty: Policy, Protest and Politics in South Africa after 1994'. Her colleagues at the Society Work and Politics institute (SWOP) which Prishani took leadership of in 2019, have best summed up the cumulative character and content of this part of Prishani's life journey: "She carried with her a belief in forming spaces of equality, community, discussion and disagreement ... committed to the work of reimagining and experimentation ... and other ways to organise life."

A planter of seeds, a beautiful soul

Prishani held a special place in her heart and mind for the Zapatistas. Over the last 20 years or so she made several visits to Chiapas and collaborated closely with Mexican activists and academics. In their tribute soon after her passing, her comrades and friends at the University of Mexico's 'Institute of Aesthetic Research' crucially reminded us that "she planted so many seeds ... [the] Zapatistas teach us that seeds are the most important presences for a future to come".

The seeds that Prishani planted were sheathed in the cores of her character; a razor-sharp intellect, critically incisive, informed, assured, reasoned and calm, all framed by an inner strength and steely determination. Like the movements and spaces she so determinedly engaged and tried to build, Prishani's seeds represent "a story in the making ... a collection of different voices, experiences, traditions and practices that ... [can evince] a new kind of politics through diversity and ... new ways of imagining possibilities for life, for struggle".

In turn, those imagined possibilities – whether as applied to the political and/or personal - were infused with Prishani's amazing capacity for empathy and nurturing. She understood that in order to try and be the kind of individual, movement, community, society and world that we desire and deserve, the foundations must be built on love and care. Hers was a beautiful human soul.

Hamba Kahle Prishani! Lifelong radical activist, feminist, intellectual and architect of struggle; tireless comrade whose passion and energy filled so many movements and lives; committed friend, sister, daughter, aunt and partner. You will be forever missed but also forever celebrated and remembered.

Prishani Naidoo: 1st Nov 1973 – 23 December 2024. She is survived by her partner Ahmed, her parents Dilli and Poonie, her sisters Sanushka and Kalnisha as well as three nephews, Akhil, Kiran and Xolani.

By Yetu Infotech Collective

HONORING COMRADE MARK THABO WEINBERG

Mark was a socialist activist best known for his leading role in building the Right2Know Campaign and previously worked in communications and media at SANGOCO, a membership based South African NGO that strengthens NGOs and civil society. Mark believed that free media can be used as a tool for people's power.

Mark's brainchild is Yetu Collective

Yetu Infotech Collective grows grassroots internet to support working-class communities to access secure, affordable, de commodified uncensored and surveillance-free networks and communication technologies. The collective was built by Mark, who cared deeply about the inherited injustices of the past and their continuing impact in the present and created a unit to fight in the struggle against the ongoing theft of common resources. He believed in rebuilding the internet, free access and empowering its users. Mark dedicated his brilliant mind and vitalising energy to create cooperation and unity amongst all whom he worked with. At a time when network intelligence is hindered by artificial intelligence, we remember Mark by carrying on with the tools we worked on together.

The apple didn't fall far from the Weinberg tree

Mark was the son of single parent Sheila Weinberg, a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and African National Congress (ANC) - who was jailed and banned for anti-apartheid activities. Working for an equal society was part of his family culture. His grandparents Eli and Violet Weinberg's activism and contribution to the struggle resulted in their exile in 1976 and 1977 and their fight for justice together with his mom Sheila, has been honoured by the renaming of once Savoy Park in Johannesburg to Weinberg Family Park.

Mark began independent activism as an undergraduate student at the University of Witwatersrand. His experience of student media at university led him away from academia without completing his degree to delve into the roots of community media branches. He then moved through a variety of civil society organisations, gaining experience while leaving his impressions

wherever he went as was his magnetic character and humour, which eventually enabled him to take on founding roles in new organisations. R2K of which he was national coordinator as well as co-founder, was notably able to mobilise and organise grassroots activists, professionals, academics and policymakers to effect change in South African justice.

We salute Mark Thabo and Aluta Continua

We lost a cadre, a brother, a father, a partner - Mark had the unique character of giving you utmost attention, listening to what you had to say, whatever vision, whatever drive you had as an activist in different spaces, for social justice, Mark was there and believed that different visions could work in the collective, as long as we were driven by the same principles.

Mark passed while serving as General Secretary of Yetu Infotech Collective, as well as serving on boards of civil society organisations such as AIDC and Cape Town TV, comrade and friend to many.



Photos supplied by Yetu Collective

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

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

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



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STILFONTEIN



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