

Something rotten in the ANC state

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The palaces of President Zuma and the massacre of miners at Marikana symbolise how the gulf between rich and poor has grown in the 18 years since the African National Congress came to power in South Africa. Hilary Wainwright reports on how formerly loyal ANC activists are turning against their government

'We knew apartheid was a deeply rooted system, we knew it would be difficult, we knew it would take time - but we did not think it would take forever. Eighteen years. Eighteen years! And we are still living like this.'

'This', for Lennox Bonile, is a cramped sitting room, bedroom and cupboard of a kitchen in the Khayelitsha area of Cape Town, with a bucket instead of a toilet and no running water in the house.

Bonile is a shop steward in the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) at the city council. He and his wife Priscilla have graduated from a bucket toilet system to a 'modified bucket system'. This means they have a 'porta-toilet' to empty their bucket into, and that toilet is itself emptied each week by casual workers working for a labour broker contracted by the city council. Moss Phakoe was shot dead two days after he handed over a dossier on corruption that implicated the mayor

Eighteen years after the mass of black South Africans lined the streets to vote in the first government of the African National Congress, 1.5 million people (almost all black or coloured) still live without proper flushing toilets; 1.7 million still live in shacks, with no proper beds, kitchens or washing facilities.

While there has been a very small narrowing of the gap between black and white people, as the result of a small minority of black people moving up the income ladder, there has been a widening of the gulf between rich and poor - and the majority of the poor are black. South Africa, as the World Bank reported in July 2012, remains one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Child malnutrition is now even higher than under apartheid, as is unemployment

The bottom 20 per cent in South Africa get less than 3 per cent of the total income, while the top 10 per cent of earners get more than 50 per cent. This is a wider gap than in Mexico, Brazil or even oligarch-filled Russia.

Almost a third of South Africa's population still lives on less than \$2 a day. Child malnutrition is now even higher than under apartheid, as is unemployment.

Broken promises

'There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!' 'There Shall be Work and Security!' 'The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!' These were the promises of the Freedom Charter, the document that inspired and united the struggle against apartheid. But more than two decades after Nelson Mandela walked free from prison, they are promises that have not been fulfilled.

'It is disturbing, an affront to our dignity and respect,' says Lennox Bonile, puzzled and frowning at why he and so many others should be living without basic services and comforts. For him and many like him, the Marikana massacre has marked their final disillusionment in the leadership of what he still wants to see as his party.

'What I didn't realise was the extent to which our leaders have been making money from the

mines,' he says. For him, in common with many long standing ANC members - he'd been a leader of the ANC youth as a young man, a member of the South African Communist Party, an activist in the South African National Civic Organisation, an organiser in the metalworkers union, NUMSA and now a leader of the disabled people's movement, as well as a SAMWU steward - this is part of a wider abuse of power that has stretched his loyalty to its limits. 'We trusted too much,' he sighs.

A short answer to Bonile's puzzlement over why things turned out this way lies in the fact that before winning government the leadership of the ANC effectively made a compromise with the corporate drivers of the recently constructed neoliberal world order. They planned a post-apartheid order that would be extremely friendly to capitalism. Marketisation and privatisation were welcomed as the main means of reconfiguring the apartheid state, codified in the ANC government's 1996 programme - the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy.

Despite its name, GEAR made explicit the new government's commitment to the private sector as the lead driver for economic growth, to opening up capital markets, reducing state expenditure and privatisation. GEAR was declared to be 'non-negotiable' by the government after a run on the rand in the first few months of 1996.

The strategy effectively replaced the more democratic, popular Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) drawn up by the main trade union organisation COSATU. It built on, rather than dismantled, essential elements of the forced labour system in which South Africa's large mining companies and then corporate capital of many kinds were able to profit from cheap (and in the mines, migrant) black labour, and is a particularly stark indictment of neoliberal economic rule.

A strategic choice

This accommodation with some of the worst aspects of neoliberalism was a clear strategic choice, and not a matter of global corporations and US-dominated bodies such as the IMF outmanoeuvring the ANC leadership. (For an excellent analysis of this evidence see John Saul's 'On the Taming of a Revolution' in *Socialist Register 2012 'The Question of Strategy'*, Merlin Press.)

It was a choice that was heavily influenced by the South African Communist Party's theory of 'socialism in two stages'. This required - in the orthodox and dominant interpretation - the building of capitalism before the struggle for socialism could proceed. At the same time, there were the domestic political consequences of the implosion of the Soviet Union and the model of socialism - with a few parliamentary-oriented modifications - in which the SACP broadly believed. With the discrediting of this model, for the ANC leaders returning from exile without direct experience of the participatory democracy growing out of the internal resistance to apartheid, it appeared that there really was 'no alternative' to neoliberalism. Indeed, Nelson Mandela's successor as president, Thabo Mbeki, is reported to have said with apparent glee on the launch of GEAR: 'Just call me a Thatcherite.'

The pro-GEAR leadership had immense moral and political influence. It not only exercised this authority to impose the strategy on the tripartite alliance (between the ANC, COSATU and the SACP) with no debate; it also used its decisive influence to close down any alternative avenues of resistance. Most significantly, in 1990 it had encouraged the leadership of the unbanned and resurgent United Democratic Front, the mass movement that gave coherence and united force to a myriad of grassroots struggles against apartheid, to decide that with the release of Mandela and the commitment to free elections, its job was done and it should dissolve itself.

A minority insisted that with the prospect of the ANC in government, a new task was beginning: to watch over the government, remaining ready for mass action to press the commitments of the Freedom Charter. These dissenting views were defeated at the time but they are now being remembered or arrived at afresh. Today veterans of the struggle and new

young activists alike refer back to the UDF experience and the importance of rebuilding that grassroots co-ordination for the 'new liberation struggle' as they work to link and sustain the record levels of community protests and strikes.

Free market weed

In 2000, Rusty Bernstein, one of the members of the ANC and the SACP who drafted the Freedom Charter in 1955, wrote in his autobiography that the dissolution of the UDF 'impoverished the soil in which ideas leaning towards socialist solutions once flourished, and allowed the weed of "free market" ideology to take hold'.

The weed of free market ideology has indeed taken hold among many of the office holders and seekers of whom Bonile speaks and who, along with many local activists like Bonile, will gather at the ANC conference early in December. Its spread was fertilised by the way black economic empowerment became essentially a policy not of decent wages, good jobs and training but enabling politicians to abuse their power to distribute tenders, often as patronage and mutual economic gain.

At the same time, however, what struck me as I talked to public service workers and community activists fighting for decent services is what a strong politicised culture still exists. While officials at all levels use vacuous but grand-sounding socialist rhetoric to divert attention from inertia or self interest, strong traditions and passions of popular political education, politicised community organising and working class democracy have been kept alive and renewed.

One is constantly reminded that the other side of freedom fighters becoming 'tenderpreneurs' is that the compromises that have produced the present injustices were based on false promises not defeat - though an organisational and political weakening has inevitably taken place. People feel they have been treated with contempt by the organisation they fought for. It is clear, from the way the miners' demand for 12,500 rand a month is echoing across from the mines to the factories, to the town halls and call centres, that there is a growing self-confidence to call in what those first ANC voters and their families were promised.

Struggling against corruption

This is producing in some areas the union-community connections that made the UDF such a powerful force. One of the many examples I heard about when I attended SAMWU's biennial conference was a struggle against corruption and for accountability and decent services in the North West province.

'Communities come to us. There is no other voice they trust,' Jacob Modimoeng, provincial secretary of SAMWU and a member of the ANC, told me. He was speaking the week after a 4,000-strong protest in Katone, where the mayor drives the latest Mercedes while municipal workers have no transport to get to the communities they are trying to serve. Katone is one of the small towns near Rustenburg, in South Africa's rich mining area. Marikana lies nearby.

At the same time that miners are fighting for living wages, SAMWU's provincial organisation is leading a struggle of public service workers and local communities, many of whom work or have family members or friends in the platinum mines. They are demanding that public money goes to public services not private bank accounts.

Rustenburg is one of the richest municipalities of the North West province. It receives considerable revenue for the bulk water and electricity that the mines depend on. If Rustenburg was carrying out its municipal responsibilities, this revenue from the mining companies would be paying for water, electricity, sanitation and roads in Marikana and Katone and the small settlements that surround them. In reality, people in these areas are surviving without proper roads, with holes in the ground rather than proper sanitation and electricity as

occasional as Christmas.

Some of the reasons for this became clear to SAMWU members. 'Members kept coming to the office with similar problems,' remembers Jacob Modimoeng. 'The sense was growing that the community was being embezzled. Municipal money was being misdirected.'

The difficulties the union was up against in acting on this information became clear as shop stewards found themselves threatened. Modimoeng describes how 'our shop stewards became targets. They told us they and their families received death threats. Unknown faces hung around them. Life became miserable.' Some, on the other hand, were approached with bribes. 'The mayor, Matthew Wolmarans, approached them and said I'll give you one million,' says Modimoeng. 'But these guys were soldiers of the revolution . . .'

Murder and the mayor

The seriousness of the attempts to clamp down on whistleblowers became clear when an ANC councillor and active trade unionist, Moss Phakoe, was shot dead as he left his house for work on 9 March 2009, two days after he had handed over a dossier on corruption that implicated mayor Wolmarans and a business associate. It was only in July 2012 that Wolmarans was jailed for 20 years for masterminding the murder of Phakoe. Wolmarans' driver was given life for firing the deadly bullet.

Moss Phakoe was shot dead two days after he handed over a dossier on corruption that implicated the mayor.

Justice might appear to have been done, after a concerted struggle by the community, the provincial organisations of COSATU as well as SAMWU, and many others. But the prison sentence seemed to alter little. At the time of writing, Wolmarans is still receiving a 35,000 rand a month salary. And in mid-September the local ANC was celebrating the ex-mayor, now convict's birthday and de facto refusing to implement the instruction of the ANC's national executive to terminate his party membership.

The killing of Moss Phakoe and the subsequent behaviour of the political colleagues of his mayoral murderer, as if nothing untoward had taken place, is just one story. It is symbolic, though, of the endemic nature of corruption - a product of the tenderisation of public services - and of the extent to which public office is being abused to pursue private gains.

By the same token, however, the campaign to bring his murderers to trial is symbolic of the determination, mutual solidarity and organising capacity of citizens, whether as betrayed service users or responsible public service workers, to pursue the democratic and social rights that they and their families believed they had won through the overthrow of apartheid.

For SAMWU, challenging corruption is not a distinct 'single issue'. Rather, as the direct product of letting the profit motive come to dominate public services, it exposes the rotten core of neoliberal politics. The rot will also be on display in Manguang at the ANC congress. It is questionable what influence the views of ANC members like Lennox Bonile and Jacob Modimoeng will have. But there are a growing number of them and they are increasingly not just speaking out but organising with other community and trade union activists to build the power that could begin to unravel the accommodations made in the past two decades.