“Keeanga–Yamahtta Taylor’s searching examination of the social, political and economic dimensions of the prevailing racial order offers important context for understanding the necessity of the emerging movement for black liberation.”
—Michelle Alexander

The eruption of mass protests in the wake of the police murders of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City have challenged the impunity with which officers of the law carry out violence against Black people and punctured the illusion of a postracial America. The Black Lives Matter movement has awakened a new generation of activists. In this stirring and insightful analysis, activist and scholar Keeanga–Yamahtta Taylor surveys the historical and contemporary ravages of racism and persistence of structural inequality such as mass incarceration and Black unemployment. In this context, she argues that this new struggle against police violence holds the potential to reignite a broader push for Black liberation.
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Restoring public service to stem corruption

Fractional battles have long been raging in the ANC. Zuma’s attack on the President before the August NEC took the battle to a new level. There have even been calls for Ramaphosa to stand down from the leadership. At issue is corruption and the role of the ANC in the state and business. The liberal press has targeted corruption as the centre of its strategy to push back at crony capitalism, which is undermining the interests of orthodox and traditional capitalism. In this they are riding the wave of public revulsion now focused on the Covid-19 personal protective equipment scandals.

The dominant story is one of the aspiring black bourgeoisie, frustrated at the slow pace of its capital accumulation. BEE has failed to put significant chunks of the economy in their hands. So they resort to the crudest forms of primitive accumulation – these are the tenderpreneurs. We cannot ignore them, and we will return to them below.

From tenderpreneurs to tenderporations

But first, let’s look at how this tenderpreneur story is also used to divert our attention from the other, daily corruption that is hidden from view.

From the earliest days of post-Apartheid South Africa, major corporations have corrupted the state by offering bribes in order to get lucrative contracts. The arms deal is a prime example - French firm, Thales, stands in the dock alongside former President Jacob Zuma. As Open Secrets put it: “this arms company faces its own charges of fraud, corruption and money laundering, all linked to paying bribes to undermine South Africa’s democratic institutions.” If it were not for the active undermining of the investigation, Swedish, British and German arms corporations would also be in the dock. These corporations are acting in exactly the same way as the “tenderpreneurs”. Perhaps we should call these corporations “tenderporations”.

Then there are the monopolists of the South African economy. Think of the many cases involving the major domestic and foreign construction companies, food companies, banks etc in price collusion. Or accounting fraud – look at Steinhoff and Tongatt Hulett to name but two. And let’s not forget their accomplices – the KPMGs and PWCs of this world – global corporations eager to share in the profit.

Regrettably, Cyril Ramaphosa’s approach is fundamentally the same as Trump’s – deal with the individuals. Or, as he put it in his letter to the ANC: “we now need to draw a line in the sand. We need to act urgently, we need to be decisive and we need to demonstrate a clear political will.”

Aside from the fact that we have yet to see a Ramaphosa who is either urgent or decisive or who has any apparent political will except for survival, there is no hint here that this is a systemic problem – a system that must be changed.

A corrupt system

It is a system which is both corrupt and corrupting.

It is corrupt to strip the heart of public service out of the hands of knowledgeable, skilled, experienced public servants and hand it over to private contractors who often lack the experience. Their incentive is to maximise profit, at the expense of the quality of the service they deliver.

We have seen the decline in service quality in Australia with Covid: the only state that put quarantine monitoring in the hands of private contractors was the only state to experience an upsurge in cases. Untrained, poorly paid, uncommitted staff did not provide the same service that public sector workers did. We’ve seen it in the UK: a contract for the Covid “track and trace”...
system was given to private companies instead of using existing public sector capacity. The results have been poor. And it is corrupting to develop a system that maximises the opportunities for corruption. Every contract between the state and private contractors is such an opportunity. So, removing public services from the public sector and giving them to private businesses encourages corruption. It makes it far more likely. It magnifies the opportunity for corrupt practices and self-enrichment at the expense of public money and public services. Just as intense competition to win Olympic gold incentivises performance enhancing drugs, competitive bidding for state contracts incentivises, backhanders, bribery and fraud.

Neoliberalism South African style

Ironically, South Africa was protected from this process during the years of apartheid through its isolation from the global economy. 1994, presented capital with virgin territory. And it even provided it with an apparently acceptable ideology – privatise, outsource and corporatise in order to empower black capital.

And you can see the logic guiding the ANC. Under Apartheid, the public sector was home to the previously disadvantaged (the whites who were disadvantaged before 1948) – Afrikaner capital and the Afrikaner working class. Take it away from them and give it to aspiring black capitalists and the rising elites through…tenders. We have a black capitalist class initially without capital, completely dependent on the state and on its procurement and tender programme.

In the process build a black middle class as a buffer to the inevitably massive Black African underclass of the unemployed. 39.7% of the South African working population had no work even at the end of March, before the pandemic. This is what this economic trajectory has brought us.

And there is a convenient ideology, a narrative that covers this private accumulation at the expense of the rest of society – it is the narrative of “empowerment”. Black Economic Empowerment, subsequently amended, when it became obvious how narrow the echelon of the empowered actually was, to Broad-based Black economic empowerment. But always individual empowerment. Never collective empowerment. There were small amounts of “Community empowerment”. But it dissolved into enrichment of a tiny elite around a chief or local leader. A small amount of money went to “worker empowerment”. This just gave temporary ownership of a tiny percentage of shares into a workers’ trust, with sometimes no payout at the end.

The only effective empowerment was of individual new black capitalists. But it came at an inevitable cost – the hollowed out dysfunctional state unable to deliver basic services to the majority.

Collective empowerment

Meanwhile, there are opportunities for real broad-based, collective empowerment. Take the recent sale of Lonmin, for example. Workers were keen on preventing Sibanye Stillwater from acquiring this mine and thereby a monopoly position in platinum mining. Workers were prepared to use their pension money to take control of the company, collectively. Yet the state failed to support it. Instead it actively promoted the Sibanye option, the corporate capital option.

Surely, and in the context of the Marikana massacre, the state could have expropriated the mine or at least nationalised it, bought out the shareholders and put in place a democratically accountable workers committee to manage it. Instead of the form of BEE we have now, we could have affirmed the mineworkers butchered at Marikana.

We cannot pursue a model of individual enrichment and then be surprised when individuals … enrich themselves. Or shocked when inequality gets worse, not better. The ANC gives us an invidious choice that is in reality no choice at all – between the neoliberal austerity of Ramaphosa and Mboweni and the public sector looting of Zuma and Magashule.

It’s time for the popular movement to unite around demands to end the tenders and bring back public services under public control. And the advantage of such a united campaign is that it is not dependent for success on winning big national battles. This campaign can be fought in every municipality, from Alfred Nzo to Nelson Mandela Bay, from King Cetshwayo to eThekwini. A campaign to end the tenders. A campaign to bring back public services and, by doing so, curb corruption.
It is early June in the City of Melbourne, Victoria State, Australia. Covid has virtually disappeared, as it has in the other five states. There are even consecutive days of no new Covid cases. It looks like the virus has been defeated, at least temporarily. Then the cases start to rise, and they have only started to fall again very recently. But that only happened in Victoria, not in any of the other five states. So what was the difference between Victoria and the other five states?

All of the states had protocols for returning travellers. They were housed in hotels and other accommodation for 14 days. In the five states, these quarantine centres were managed and monitored by public sector workers – police and, in some cases, the army. But Victoria was different. Victoria took neoliberalism that extra mile. The quarantine centres were managed and monitored by private companies, contracted by the state. Unfortunately, as stories of private security guards sleeping with quarantined returned travellers demonstrated, it seems it didn’t work quite so well. Who knows if it was even cheaper?

Community Health Workers
In South Africa, as in most other countries, health workers have been praised as heroes during the pandemic. But apparently “praise” and “pays” are two different things. Praise comes cheap. Payment is another matter. Community Health Workers (CHWs) have been crucial in the fight against the last pandemics of TB and HIV/AIDS. They are equally crucial in this one. In order to be able to prevent the virus spreading, it is necessary to have a system of tracing people who are known to be infected. Who is more important than CHWs in doing that?

And yet, on Monday July 6th, at the height of the pandemic in the Eastern Cape, CHWs were forced to gather together and attempt to hand over a petition to the Eastern Cape Health Department. The provincial leadership showed what they really think of CHWs. They didn’t even turn up to receive the memorandum. Which just goes to show how true the complaint of CHWs is – they are not recognised. Their value is not recognised. The Province does not even recognise their dignity as workers. They have no job security – they are on annual contracts. They are paid the minimum wage - R3,500 per month. And they have no benefits, no UIF, no pension funds nothing. The hypocrisy of the provincial leadership is there for all to see. And as if that was not enough. By 16th July, they had still not received any reply to their demands. So they occupied Dukhumbane Building in the Department of Health in Bhisho. As soon as it came to evening and the media left, the police attacked and scattered them using rubber bullets.

If the Province respects the CHWs, it will put them on permanent employment contracts, with benefits. It will pay them more than the minimum wage. And when they have something to say to the provincial leadership, that leadership will listen to them with courtesy. That would be respect.
Austerity not alcohol responsible for hospital shortages
It is not alcohol that creates a shortage of hospital staff or hospital beds or hospital equipment. So said NUMSA in a press statement recently. It is persistent underfunding and outsourcing that undermine both the quality and the quantity of the service. And, as we can see from a number of articles in this issue of Amandla! austerity has not stopped yet. Despite all the evidence of the pandemic about how crucial public services like healthcare and education are, Tito Mboweni continues to implement budgetary austerity. Cuts in the public sector wage bill will lead to large numbers of job losses. Job losses will lead to a further deterioration of services. No amount of abstaining from drinking will stop that.

Rhodes loses his head
No literally. Not metaphorically. In the UK they took the statue of a Bristol slave trader and dumped it in the river. Here, only the head has gone…so far. Rhodes has already been removed, most properly, from looking down on students at UCT. Now it is appropriate that he is removed from looming over the people of Cape Town as a whole. The memorial structure should remain – just get rid of the person. That’s a project some hactivists seem to have begun. The memorial should be re dedicated to the miners of South Africa, who gave their lives and livelihoods so that Cecil John could be wealthy. Commission a new work of art to replace him. His time on the mountain is over.

Ghana waste pickers threatened
The Government of Ghana has suddenly decided to close landfill sites in Accra and Kumasi. 500 waste pickers will lose their livelihoods in Kpone (Accra) alone. Just one example of a government making use of the Covid-19 crisis to do something they have been wanting to do for a while. They had promised to consult with the waste pickers, but of course no consultation has taken place. “We have years of experience here and know a lot,” says Johnson Doe, who leads the Kpone Waste Pickers Association. “We are people of vision. We want the government to recognise us, include us, talk to us.” And it’s not only the jobs. The Kpone perform what a sane society would regard as an essential service – recovering more than 650 tonnes of recyclable material every year.

Again, like with the Community Health Workers of South Africa’s Eastern Cape, government refuses to even recognise socially useful work and workers. The battle lines are being constantly drawn over how we will emerge from this pandemic – a renewed, cleaner, more human society? Or increased exploitation, austerity and oppression? A lot is resting on the organisation of working class and poor people.

Capital protects itself from the virus
Businesses take out insurance against what is called “business interruption”. This is designed to help companies survive an unexpected event that might cause it to collapse. Nothing could be more unexpected than the virus, you would think. In the hospitality and tourism industry, there is a specific provision in the insurance policies to cover businesses in the event of an infectious or contagious notifiable disease. The Covid-19 pandemic would fit squarely into this provision, you would think. But the insurance industry is worried more about its profits than its clients. So it is refusing to pay out. They claim that it wasn’t Covid-19 which caused the businesses to close. It was the lockdown. So the businesses are not covered.

This is a cynical move on behalf of the immensely powerful and wealthy insurance companies. They know they may well lose a legal case eventually. But meanwhile, many businesses will have disappeared because the very insurance they have been paying for is not now paying out. So by the time the legal case is over, the companies will have a much smaller bill to pay. We are told “we are all in this together; the virus does not discriminate”. Apparently it does discriminate – in favour of big capital. But where’s the surprise in that?

Black lives matter!
Once again, we don’t need to go as far as the US to find instances of brutality by police against innocent black people. We don’t need, on this occasion, to go further than Eldorado Park. Nathaniel Julius aged 16, living with Down’s Syndrome. Shot and killed in cold blood by police who then tried to escape their responsibility by claiming he was caught in the crossfire of gang warfare. Yet another tragic death of a black person at the hands of “security” forces. Whose security, we wonder. As SAFTU said in a press statement: “We know of no incident where police and the military used live ammunition and murdered any of residents of Sandton or Stellenbosch.”

Some illuminating statistics
The median salary of a CEO of a listed company reached R5.262 million by the end of February this year. So says the global accounting company PricewaterhouseCoopers. That’s 66 times the national minimum wage. Interestingly, there has been recent research into what people think is the ideal ratio of CEO salary to unskilled workers’ salary, and it’s very far from 66:1. It’s actually 4.6:1.

The report also found that 86% of CEOs at the 100 biggest companies were white, and that they earn on average 15% more than the median salary of their black, coloured, and Indian counterparts. Long live transformation!
This article is based on interviews with women farmworkers, both permanent and seasonal. They work on wine, citrus, flower and vegetable farms in the Langeberg District of the Western Cape (Robertson, Ashton, Bonnievale, Montague and McGregor.) They are organised by the militant farmworkers’ union, CSAAWU (Commercial, Stevedore and Agriculture Workers Union).

The situation and conditions of farmworkers have not changed much with Covid. What has changed is the difficulties the union has experienced in engaging the management of farms. All the women and union officials we spoke to talked of the lack of transparency. There has been a complete lack of consultation with shop stewards working on the farms, as well as with union officials. There was very limited access to any recourse given that both the Department of Labour and the CCMA were closed. Later, as restrictions were eased, the CCMA was accessible virtually. But what use is that to farm workers who do not even have mobile phones?

The day the lockdown was announced, great uncertainty reigned on South African farms: “We were, very confused: is the lockdown for us or are we essential workers? Are workers on wine farms essential or just those working on fruit and vegetable farms? Many of us did not want to go to work. We were scared. We knew almost nothing about the virus.”

Women laid off while men work
Even the farmers were confused, and just as fearful as the workers. They were not clear on the lockdown rules and were scared the workers would spread the virus. The workers on Uitkyk wine farm explained: “When the lockdown was announced, we were in the midst of harvesting and there was still a lot to pick.” Gina, a permanent worker, elaborated on the confusion that existed: “The farm owner stopped all the women from completing the harvesting. On that day, at the end of March, we were all told to stay at home, both women and men. Yet one week later the men were called back to work, but not the women. I asked why, because I am a permanent worker. Yet, I was expected to make ends meet and feed my children. I am a single parent.”

Masks and sanitisers were widely distributed. Yet transport from the township remained a big problem because overcrowding continued. Everyone was packed into the trucks without any regard for physical distancing.

Elsie, who works on Buitenverwacht as a seasonal worker, added: “We were also told that there were restrictions and therefore there is no work. I was already struggling because I worked only three days a week and earned only R162 per day. Now I was laid off and men were at work. It seemed to me that as women we could be sacrificed to stay at home and care for the children and save the salaries for the men. This is so unfair.”

Other women spoke about the challenges of childcare, because all the creches on the farms were shut. Given that their income was very limited, they struggled to feed all the mouths that were now forced to stay at home. One of the women said: “The farmer would not allow us to go into town to do our groceries. They bought the food and deducted the money from our wages. I did not like this because it meant they did not shop carefully with my limited cash. And they deducted it from my limited cash. And they deducted it from my limited cash.”

The story of Hannah Fries
One of the other women, Hannah Fries, was really hurt and angry as she recounted what she experienced: “I will be 49 years old in mid August. I worked at Konigsriver for 31 years. The farm grows flowers. The owners, Barry Oosthuizen and his wife, have 5 children that I helped rear. And now I am being dumped.”

Hannah’s problem started in 2009 when she got injured in a tractor accident:

“I was on the tractor that was on its way to collect flowers. The driver lost control and, as a result of the accident, I sustained a severe leg injury and was hospitalised and put off work for two months. When I returned to work,
because of my disability I worked in the kitchen. My work included cleaning the holiday cottages on the farm. Just before the lockdown, the wife of the boss, Mrs Oosthuizen, called me in and said that there was no more work. She told me to stay at home as part of the Covid-19 restrictions. I thought everyone had to stay at home. However, after the first week, I heard from my husband that there was a meeting on the farm between the farm workers and the boss to speak about the lockdown and loss of income for the farm. Mr Oosthuizen told the workers that they would have to stay at home. He was only prepared to pay workers for two weeks. After that they could make a loan of R850 per week, which would have to be repaid once work resumed. Everyone accepted this because nobody had any money. We live from hand to mouth, so what could we do? Women had to work short-time.

As for me, I was told I don’t work for the boss I work for the wife. She informed me that I would not be paid either and could get a loan of R500 per week. If I wanted payment then I have to join the work team that picks flowers. Yet she knew that the doctor had put me off from such work. What is worse, given my loyal service of 31 years, Mrs Oosthuizen had employed another worker to assist with the cleaning of the holiday cottages. Eventually, after several struggles, I was told to return to work in the middle of June, just two days a week. There was no masks or sanitisers. I had to take my own.

To make matters worse, at the end of July my husband got ill with Covid. We were quarantined for 14 days. Not only were we not paid but we were told to make our own transport arrangements to get to work and not with the other workers on the farm bakkie."

The union organiser says that Hannah’s situation is common. Hannah continued:

“This Covid situation has forced us to accept some bad conditions. Many workers now have loans that they took to get through the lockdown. Covid is not our creation, but we who have nothing are bearing the brunt of the situation. Some of us wanted to apply for UIF money but the boss refused to sign the forms. Very often we do not have proper contracts and don’t know if we have been properly registered for UIF. We feel very uncertain about our jobs. We don’t even have a pay slip. I don’t even know who employs me and what the labour contract says. The past five months of Covid left us without much, except we know a lot more about our bosses."

Women are property
Women workers have carried the cost of short-time and lay-offs as many were forced to stay at home. Because women farm workers have been more precarious, with informal conditions of work, it is easier for the bosses to retrench. Those with fixed term contracts, mostly men, could apply for benefits from the UIF, take special leave or, as a last resort, take their paid annual leave during the lockdown. None of these options is available for women working on a casual basis. Often, women are not unionised and accept their plight without too much push back. They are afraid of being evicted and not allowed back, even as casual workers. These fears also extend to housing, because women working on farms have no security of tenure. Women working on farms generally have limited rights, and housing contracts are not given to women. They are seen as the care givers, the women of the men, as “belongings, as property”. Covid-19 has just locked this down even harder.

Women workers have carried the cost of short-time and lay-offs as many were forced to stay at home.
My name is Gladys Mnyengeza. I am 67 years old. I am married and staying in Kuyasa, Khayelitsha with my husband, children and grandchildren. I am still working as a domestic worker at 67 years old, and I am working for this family for 38 years.

Going to work during the Pandemic
You know it’s very bad. I stayed at home for three months. It’s very sad because you used to see your friends. Now you don’t see your friends anymore.

And now in this time of Covid–19 you find out that in the taxi they don’t care. They are supposed to give us sanitiser, but they haven’t got. You feel they don’t want to do what the government said. So we have to just sit there, because you can’t say anything to the taxis. So that was the first fear.

Then to find out two of my friends died. It was so sad because I couldn’t go to my friend in Site B. We used to travel together. I couldn’t go there because I am scared, and the law said 50 to go to the funeral. So that hurts you, you know, because we have been together for more than 40 years.

It’s very sad. You hear the stories of domestic workers who are losing their jobs and they don’t get nothing. Like in March they got half, but then after March the employer says, “I can’t pay you because of Covid–19”. The other bad thing is now they are saying that it is us domestic workers that is bringing this Covid–19 into their houses.

Covid stories
I will tell you something that I saw one morning. Next door to where I work, there is a lady working there. The lady called me and she said: “Gladys, can you look?”. When I look at my friend, I saw the employer undress her outside on the veranda. She undresses her there. And then after, she takes those green things that the doctors are using when they go for operations, but it’s a plastic one. And then the employer covers her with this thing. And then she takes something that looks like a belt and puts it around her hips, and puts another thing over it. And then she leaves the lady’s clothes outside.

My question was this: if she must wear something like this, does her employer also wear something like this inside the house? And then we see the employer coming outside with no mask, no nothing.

But it was so sad to me. It’s like they are saying that the domestic workers are bringing the Covid–19 in their houses. That’s why now they treat the domestic workers like this.

And the other case that I am dealing with is this domestic worker who was told by her employer to come and live with her from June until December. And she said to her employer: “I can’t do that because I have kids. Who is going to do my kids’ homework? Who is going to look after my kids, because they are still very small?” But the employer said if she doesn’t stay there, she will have to find another person.

She started working somewhere else and this employer has still not paid her. She then says she must go and claim UIF, only to find out that the employer did not register her. Then she eventually said I will give you your wages for three months and my father’s old car.

You know I am working in an area where most of the white people knows me and sometimes you want to answer when they say to you: “Can you see Gladys, she puts her mask under her nose?” But she is shouting this to me when she is not wearing a mask. They make us feel like we are the ones bringing the virus. So sometimes I want to respond and ask: “Where is your mask?” But then they will say I am being rude. So I just keep quiet.

Joining the Union
I think I joined SADSAWU (the South Africa Domestic and Allied Workers Union) because of Covid–19. We thought we should be fighting for what we need. Now we have a union and we can fight for our rights.
African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union) in 2007. I am now the Deputy Chairperson and Treasurer of SADSAWU nationally and here in the Western Cape.

But you know it’s very difficult. We have domestic workers coming to the office and there are many cases during this time of the Covid. And it is so difficult. Employers will tell you to go to the UIF, and when the domestic worker gets there to Department of Labour, she will find out that the employer has not registered her. You know as domestic workers it is so hard; we often do not know where to go. Even if you go to Department of Labour, even they do not care for us as domestic workers.

And most domestic workers, we do not understand the laws of Labour. That’s why we have all these workshops for domestic workers, so that they understand the laws.

But what must we do when the employer says they cannot pay her? Where is the domestic worker going to get money? She did work for that month but now the employer says I cannot give you this amount because I haven’t got money. We must stand with the domestic worker not for the employer.

And who is going to look after me? We have to suffer because there is kids, there is food, there is electric, there is everything we must buy. It’s winter now, so we must buy paraffin. We must buy bread. You know when the kids are at home they eat too much.

So really, who is going to look after me? Because I am still looking after my family. I am helping them. Is my employer going to look after me? If I get Covid, my employer is going to say I must stay home. She will be scared. When I am sick, my employer would always take me to her doctor. But I doubt if I get Covid if she will take me to her doctor; maybe she will be scared of taking me to her doctor.

I was not scared before I saw two of my friends passed away, and my family, three of them, and my husband’s family. Then I did get very scared. I believe to pray God just help us. This thing must go past. Please look after us. I do believe in that.

Loss of friendship
It’s worst on Saturday. I wake up at 4 o’clock to go to work. You know, I used to travel alone. I used to go out alone and catch the bus at 4.50am, but now I catch the bus at 6.10am. We are scared because our places are not safe, but we take that risk. We used to go to work as a group but these things changed because of Covid, and they are not at work. Now I have to go out alone. Luckily my granddaughter she is doing grade 7. I walk with her now to the bus.

You know in our culture you must go to your neighbour and ask how they are. Now we cannot do that. But now every week we get in touch with each other on the phone. It is very difficult. I will be very glad if I can see my friends and colleagues again. I think I will see them. This virus will come down and then we can see each other, and I will be very glad to see them.

In town, there is a café there in Golden Acre. In the morning before we go to work, we sit there and we meet there and we talk and talk and then we go to our work. There, in Kloof street, there’s a place, it’s a pizza place. We like to sit there and wait for each other there. Because if we don’t see each other, we ask: “Where is this one”? We wait there and we see each other and then we go to work after that.

Now we don’t do that. We get from the bus and you just walk straight. Sometimes I sit outside 7/11 in Kloof street and wait. But there is nobody; I am sitting alone there. It was only this morning I saw one of the ladies. We were so happy, you won’t believe. We were laughing. You know, mos, our people we like to hug. We are not supposed to hug, but we did hug each other this morning. But after we hugged she said to me: “Mama, we not supposed to hug.” But we had hugged already.
I am Stoney – I am strong

My name is Stoney. I work at Groote Schuur hospital. My full name is Vuyokazi Gladys Sithole. I have been working at Groote Schuur since 1988 as a cleaner. Now I serve as a supervisor for cleaning.

I was born in 1956. I live in Khayelitsha with my granddaughter who I care for. She is 13 years old. Stoney is my nickname. It was given to me by my father because he said I was a strong girl. I was his rock. I have been a member of the union almost from day one when I started at Groote Schuur.

Cleaning is essential

Cleaners at the hospital do critical work for the doctors, but mainly for the nurses. We have to sanitise and clean everything, from the door handles to the toilets. It is worse now because from March 2020 we are faced with the coronavirus. You can imagine now under Covid-19 how important our work is. I know I am not a doctor or nurse, but the work we do as cleaners is very important. It is life and death work. It’s mostly women doing this important work, but we are not seen. We deserve to be noticed. The hospitals would collapse without us.

And yet our situation as cleaners is very difficult. We are not just cleaners of Groote Schuur. We are cleaners from many different companies because labour broking companies also supply cleaners to the hospital. They don’t have the same conditions as those of us who are employed directly by the hospital. I have been working with these workers to fight to have the same conditions as ours. We have had some success – a kind manager, Mr De Jaager, has agreed to provide transport home for workers in the evening, and all workers, even the labour broker workers, can use this transport. But the struggle for the labour broker workers continues.

Trauma under Covid

Now with the virus our situation is traumatic. Some of our colleagues have passed away, some are very sick. And then it’s worse when you are travelling in the morning.

I have to take two taxis. I leave my house in the dark after making sure my grandchild has what she needs for the day. School is closed. I am very scared for her. I lock her up in the house, only with the security of my dog, which will keep unfriendly people away. I come home between 6.30 and 7 at night. I first sanitise myself, take my clothes off and wash myself before I hug my grandchild. It is hard. Then we cook and clean. I have taught her to help me so it’s not too hard, especially when I am very tired. To work under the conditions of Covid is very hard and I am often exhausted, even emotionally.

And we can’t get support from our neighbours and friends. I don’t visit them as before. I told them I work at Groote Schuur and I don’t want to be the cause of them getting sick. So I protect my neighbours and I protect myself. We are reduced to greeting over the fence. Those days of drinking tea and coffee together are of the past.

The virus and travelling to work

The taxi owners have been quite good about ensuring the drivers observe the hygiene protocols, but you don’t know about the person you’re sitting next to. Sometimes you have to tell the person to wear the mask and to sanitise their hands. I have my own sanitiser with me. I don’t rely on the driver. As the passengers, you collect the money and pass it on. So you need to sanitise your hands. I even sanitise the person next to me. Sometimes, but not often, we have drivers who don’t wear masks. I don’t hesitate to ask: “Where’s your mask?” There have been times where I have said...
please stop the taxi, and I get out because I don’t think the situation is safe. Of course that can make me late for work, which is another issue that I have to deal with.

Then, when you get to work, you are more traumatised because you know what it’s like from working in the ICU. You have seen the person that has passed away or is suffering – battling to breathe.

Labour brokers
What makes things worse is that we are working with the private companies. The bosses of these companies tender at Groote Schuur. They don’t care about these women who are their workers. They don’t care when they are sick, They still expect them to come to work. They show no concern for them. I have approached the management to ask can we not treat all cleaners the same, regardless who the employer is.

It’s not just cleaning where we have these private companies. All over the hospital there are tenders. There are private companies in the kitchen, for the linen, even the porters. The porters employed by Groote Schuur are few, and the majority are private. I have worked with these labour broker workers and encouraged them to join the union. Many did join, and recently we won important gains for them at the CCMA

What is amazing, it is often the outside workers that work in the Covid ward. The Groote Schuur workers don’t work there.

Getting sick
Recently, two colleagues that I work closely with got sick with the virus. This was very scary as I was very worried for them and for myself. I didn’t know whether I had been infected. Now even though I had had close contact with them, I had to pressurise the hospital to have me tested. In the end I just said I had headaches and an aching body so that they would test me. What if I had the virus and I started infecting people I work with and travel with, and my granddaughter as well? I was given three days off to see if I developed any symptoms while I waited for the result. When I was told I was negative I broke down. I was crying. I wasn’t crying for me but for my colleagues, the ones that I had seen in the ICU and who passed away. I just couldn’t go immediately back to work. I told management I’m not going to work; I’m traumatised; I’m taking the rest of the week off. They accepted that.

My colleagues were quarantined in a hotel in Milnerton. It was difficult because it was hard to support them. You go to the place but you are not allowed to see them. You give your food parcels to the security and you hope your friends get it. Of course, because my colleagues are women and are now in quarantine, it means we must go and help their families to look after their children. There’s no support from the hospital, no support from anyone other than those who care.

Some of the nurses also got infected and one of the sisters passed away. But the strange thing is you don’t always know who has become sick or passed away from the virus. Sometimes the family will go to the media, but mostly people don’t want people to know, for fear of how things will affect them.

NEHAWU has gone AWOL
I have to say, the hospital management has been quite caring now that we are faced with Covid–19. If you cough, they are quick to offer medicine and even suggest for you to go home. But I have to confess that even though I am a long–standing member of the union, NEHAWU, we have not seen them. Not even a message to find out how we are doing. They just keep quiet. We know nothing about the struggle for an increase. You know the government has withdrawn from this year’s wage agreement. But the union has not said anything about what they are going to do to ensure we get our increase. It’s not as if food and transport has not gone up in price.

If I was in Parliament I would insist that all the workers in the hospital should be employed by Groote Schuur. All the workers have been working very hard. They have been like soldiers. They should be employed by government, with decent conditions. They should be recognised.
Interview with Vida Claasen: retail worker

I am Vida Claasen and I have been working for a major supermarket chain for 27 years. In 1996 I joined the union and became a shop steward, as the previous two years had shown me that the company treated the unionised workers very differently to non-unionised workers. Since then I have been very active in union structures that represent retail workers, and particularly workers employed in supermarkets.

Working all the time

Personally, due to being so busy with my political work, and I am also involved with rugby, I never had time to have my own social life, so I am still single at the age of 50. I don’t have any children so it is easier for me to get around when it comes to dealing with all the pressures of work.

For our members working in the retail sector it is quite difficult, especially for the single mothers. In retail, the majority of workers are female, but I can count on my hands how many long-serving women work at managerial level. And more than 60% are variable employees (casuals).

Even before Covid it was difficult for mothers across the board because their shifts start at 10am. That means that in the morning there is only time to make sure their children have breakfast and then they only see the children again at 10PM (of which they will be asleep already). In the hotels, working hours are even worse.

These working hours mean that the mother is never at home. She doesn’t know what is happening in her child’s life, and also she doesn’t have control over the child if things like drugs become a problem.

From the company’s side there is no sympathy. They just call in people to speak with us about how to provide support if someone has a drug problem.

When I listen to how the women workers talk, their stress is double compared to the men. The women are worried about the children at home, even when the husband is home. Is the husband looking after the children? What am I making for dinner? Has he started making supper? What if I get infected and have to go to hospital? The women are on edge all the time. They don’t want to break the code of social distancing.

Men, some of them are taking the virus seriously. It’s not that the other men don’t; it’s just that they are more relaxed, which tells me that the responsibility for managing the consequences of the virus lies with the female.

Trauma

Working during the pandemic has been very stressful and traumatic. We are being exposed to the virus and getting sick because we are not adequately protected. For the first few weeks of lockdown we didn’t have any screens, we only had masks. Some managers would just ignore the regulations.

In my store, the first Covid-19 case only appeared in June. As soon as one came out, all of a sudden there were so many more – 14 cases in just 6 days. It was so frightening. Managers can afford to sit in their offices behind closed doors, but we have to go through all the trauma in the store. Those mammies working in the store have to deal with rude customers. They had to be scared for themselves; when they go home they have to be scared about infecting their family. The risk of infecting your own family – that is the most scary part. But they have to earn an income because the husband may not have a job, since some workplaces laid off people.

And because of lockdown everyone is frustrated at home. The husband is frustrated at home as his role has changed.

The first person that was infected with Covid-19 in my store is still suffering post-traumatic stress. She only came back after a month and a half and had an anxiety attack the moment she came into the store. When someone approaches her from behind she jumps. It got to the point where she was just collapsed from time to time. She got some counselling from the hospital but from the company’s side there is no support. How do you just leave workers hanging like that? The risks that the company takes are also part of the cause of what we women go through during this pandemic.
The hidden costs of accessing health care

The problem is also the health system. Facilities are overloaded. You can’t just go now and expect to be helped. I know of one woman who had a health problem and went to hospital. She was seven months pregnant. Under normal conditions she would have been assisted quicker, but with the pandemic it’s impossible and she and her baby both died.

For those women who have to quarantine at home, things can be difficult. One lady had to go to a facility to isolate because they don’t have the space for her to be alone in a room at home. She has a baby only 9 months old. The child was breastfeeding but had to go on the bottle. Now the husband is alone with the baby struggling, as it’s obvious the child wanted her mom.

When self-isolating you don’t get paid your normal wage – they will take from your sick leave, TERS and UIF. I had to quarantine for about 20 days. When I was due to go back to work it was extended to another close contact of mine. Who paid for my Covid test? – me, myself and I! At least I had medical aid, but how difficult for those who don’t?

People also don’t want to get tested because they lose sick days. Then if your child gets sick, you can’t even take sick days because your allocation will be exhausted. Why would the companies put their employees out like that? This is really bad of the companies because it’s not that they won’t be able to get assistance from the government – the options are there.

Lack of safety regulations leaves workers vulnerable

Something that the government omitted to do during the first lockdown, and now again with the change to Level 2, is to stipulate exactly how many people are allowed into supermarkets. They can do this for hotels, so why not supermarkets? To me that is worrisome because it means there can be more than 50 shoppers in a store at a time – alongside the 100 workers who work in the store.

This is a daily struggle for us. Sometimes we call the health inspectors to come and see if it is safe for us to work with so many shoppers in the store. They have actually told the managers to limit the number of customers who can shop at one time, so that has been a help. Government must regulate the retailers. We feel like the company is being reckless.

Outsourced workers

As for the outsourced workers, the company doesn’t care a bit about them. Their own companies are responsible for them. These people are so afraid to join a union – afraid that they may just be fired because of that. When permanent workers get sick, outsourced workers are brought in. Sometimes entire departments have to close down. In one of the shops, all of the workers in the butchery had to stay away from work because the majority tested positive for Covid and the rest had to self-isolate. No one was left. So the union told the company that if they bring in outsourced workers they should have the same screening and the same safety equipment as our staff.

Who carries the cost of curfews?

During the curfews we negotiated that people should not work past 6pm. But then, with the lockdown regulations, transport was a problem. The company would not pay the taxi service for a full load, and the taxis did not want to continue working with a 50% load, because they also have households to feed. We workers then had to arrange our own transport.

Curfews also meant shorter trading hours, which meant less working hours for our variable time employees. So as the union we negotiated that full time staff should work an hour longer every day so that variable time employees (casuals) can still work a full day Saturday and Sunday with the reduced trading times. It’s sad, because normally they would work between 27-40 hours a week, with transport provided, and now it is down to 26 hours a week – and they still pay for their own transport. This makes employees not to disclose when feeling under the weather, afraid of losing more income. Again these are majority female employees and single parents, of which some are sole breadwinners in their respective households.

Retrenchment

Before Covid, this was already tabled but will now even be worse. Companies claim they are struggling, yet CEOs get compensated enormous amounts. The working class has to be satisfied with always getting the short end of the stick.
My name is Busisiwe Ngcangca. I am a professional nurse working at Livingstone hospital in Port Elizabeth. I work in the casualty department. I live with my partner and two children, a daughter Liyolise, who is 11 and a son Unako, who is 2. I am a care worker – at work and at home. My days are very long.

I am the one who takes care of everyone. You know how family members think; when there is a nurse around they expect everything to be done by the nurse, to nurse them actually. After getting up at 5.00 in the morning, I prepare the children, make breakfast for everyone and then take my children to my parents because the schools are closed. When I come home after work, I fetch them, make dinner and settle them for the night. My daughter is great at helping me.

At the hospital, I work long and stressful hours – shifts of 12 hours. I alternate between working a long and short week.

I work in casualty. Livingstone hospital is the busiest casualty department in the Province. It has specialist units and gets referrals from other hospitals across the Eastern Cape. I work in the surgical department.

You would not expect to have many Covid cases in the surgical department. People are screened when they come in. However, it was June when Covid cases were rising rapidly in the Eastern Cape. One does not know if the patients are positive or not. Some are waiting for their test results. Others can be asymptomatic but positive. Nevertheless, these patients are not coming for Covid, they are coming for surgery. Four of my colleagues tested positive for Covid-19. We demanded that the Unit be closed for deep cleansing, but the hospital management refused to do that and sent us from pillar to post to divert us. We just could not get the place closed.

All the time we continued to work and think about the needs of the patient. These are our people. We cannot neglect our patients; we are there for them. Meanwhile, infections spread to other colleagues. At one stage there were 26 infected when I was quarantined. It was only after my third test, that I was tested positive. I think my second test was a false negative because I was very sick with all the symptoms of headaches, sore throat, fever, loss of taste, etc. My first test was because I had been nursing the first Covid patient at Livingstone hospital.

Now, you must understand, when the Eastern Cape Herald did an interview with me and asked me what my biggest fear is, I told them it was contracting the virus and taking it home. My big fear was infecting my parents and my partner. My dad is 77, with diabetes, and my mother is 67. So they are very vulnerable and in the danger zone. And this is exactly what happened.

My partner tested positive and my dad became very ill but survived.

After having had two tests, which were negative, I was reluctant to test again even though I never got better from the symptoms I was experiencing. I went to see my doctor who put me on antibiotics and said if I did not recover I should test again. In the meantime my partner got sick and we both decided to test. He got his positive result and then I went to test.

Even though I am a nurse and have been dealing with Covid patients, when the doctor called me first thing on that Monday morning, I was really shocked. I could not even respond for some minutes. I could hear he was talking but it was like he was talking far away from me. It was the shock of my life. As a nurse you see people dying, being helpless because of Covid and you know it is affecting old and young, poor and rich, black and white.

I was quarantined at a facility while my partner had to self-isolate at home. This was a most difficult period because my children had to stay with my partner.
The nursing profession is looked down on and is not considered as a profession like other professions because it is mainly dominated by women. This, even though we go to university and get degrees, just like radiographers, same as other professionals. Culturally women are expected to take care of people. That is why nurses are being disregarded, undermined, underpaid and overworked. Instead of recognising nursing as a profession it is recognised as a calling and we are expected to sacrifice and accept these bad conditions. It is because nurses are mainly women and this is the role of women, i.e. to care. This is why nursing is looked down on.

And while there is a lot of noise from government and in the media about the role of frontline workers we have received absolutely no recognition. You should remember this year was supposed to be the year of the nurse and our role should have been celebrated throughout the year. There has been nothing. I had an incident where, when I went to the fast food outlet near the hospital, other people want to avoid us. When you go to shops people move away from you and you feel discriminated, as if there is a big stigma attached to us. Instead of being celebrated and appreciated as health care workers that put their and their family’s lives on the line.

And when it comes to the Health Department they say we are the frontliners, the people’s health is in our hands, but yet there is nothing to show our appreciation, NOTHING! We work under strenuous conditions. We have to make ends meet. It is amazing, the other workers in the hospital are scared of the Covid patients and so it is only the nurses who are present. We become a porter, housekeeper, cleaner, jack of all trades. And the most ridiculous situation, if you can believe, that in this crisis, people are looking for opportunities to sue. We are scared that we as nurses will be made scapegoats for the health system. Rather than going after management or the doctors, we nurses are also in the frontline of claims or suits by patients or their families, as if it is our fault they got sick or died. Even during these hard times you are stressing.

We are burnt out physically, emotionally, financially. Being a nurse in 2020 in the Covid era is traumatic. I have colleagues who were crying at work wanting to resign because it is too much.

We have a psychology department at work where we can attend debriefing sessions. The problem is these are scheduled, and given the constant “rush hour” in my unit it has been impossible for me to attend.

The Union, the Young Nurses Indaba helped me and my colleagues a lot. They were my heroes. When the department was demanding that we must quarantine at the Stadium, the union, working with respected NGOs they found more appropriate alternatives.

During this period my children had to stay with my parents. It was so difficult to be separated from my children. My little one, the boy did not understand why he could not be with me. The only communication was via video calls. And he was a great worry because since he was born he has been in and out of hospital. He has asthma and multiple allergies. You can just imagine the stress I was under. After the 14 days of quarantine I was very reluctant to go back to work. I was very emotional. Going through the hospital premises made me very anxious and I felt I was not ready to go back to work. I was thinking I am going to the very same place where I got the disease and I am expected to perform as normal. It was a very difficult period. I could not sleep at night. I had to go and see the psychologist, who even had to give me medication for sleep. It took me two weeks after quarantine to be in a fit state to return to work. I remember the first day back at work I could not even greet my colleagues because I was so emotional. It was like I was reliving the scene again. I would even have a scratchy throat and a headache as if I had become infected again.
South Africa’s second pandemic: reflecting on gender-based violence during & beyond Covid-19

By Mercy Brown-Luthango

FOR THE PAST FIVE MONTHS South Africa, like many other countries across the globe, has been caught in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has fundamentally changed every aspect of our working and social lives. Its impact on the economy and the livelihoods of thousands of South Africans has been devastating. The pandemic has also shone a light on the everyday struggles of millions of South Africans in terms of food insecurity, joblessness and violence, particularly gender-based violence. The impact of these challenges affects men and women differently – they are not gender neutral.

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified women’s multiple vulnerabilities. The South African economy has reportedly lost about 3 million jobs since the start of the lockdown. Two-thirds of these jobs belonged to women. Women make up the majority of those employed in the informal sector, the sector hardest hit by the pandemic. Informal workers have no job security, do not enjoy the protection of labour legislation and cannot access credit. For women, this entrenches economic dependency on men – one of the factors that keeps them trapped in abusive relationships.

Government, the media and other bodies have constantly called for the public to protect themselves and others by social distancing and staying at home. This is considered the most effective way of protecting oneself from contracting the virus. But what does safety mean?

The unsafe home

The home might offer protection against an unseen enemy in the form of a virus, but it is also the place where women are most at risk of experiencing gender-based violence.

Beyond Covid-19

Most of South Africans have been in lockdown since the start of the lockdown. This number reportedly rose to more than 120,000 during the first three weeks of the lockdown. This prompted the President to refer to gender-based violence as South Africa’s second pandemic, in the midst of Covid-19.

This dynamic is not unique to South Africa. Countries all over the world, including the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, India, Greece, Germany and Brazil to name but a few, have seen increases in the number of reported domestic abuse cases during lockdown. A state-run drop-in centre for victims of domestic abuse in Brazil, for example, reported a 40-50% rise in domestic violence cases. A helpline in the Catalan region of Spain saw a 20% rise in calls during the first few days of lockdown. Calls to similar hotlines in Cyprus increased by 30% during the first week.

Statistics on violence and crime are notoriously unreliable as they only take reported incidents into account. Domestic violence is also not captured by police as a separate category of violence. This further skews the picture of the extent of gender-based violence in South Africa. Why is this still the case, 22 years after the Domestic Violence Act was passed in 1998?

There is no denying that gender-based violence is one of the biggest challenges in South Africa, in and outside the context of this pandemic. Violence against women is endemic and South Africa is often referred to as the “rape capital” of the world. A complex web of inter-linked factors, operating at the household, city, and national levels, sustains the high levels of violence against women. These include structural drivers like poverty, inequality and unemployment, as well as societal and cultural norms and practices. These structural drivers are rooted in a patriarchal system that still treats women as inferior to men. This results in unequal power relations between men and women and unequal access to resources and material benefits, such as educational opportunities and certain types of jobs and remuneration that boost women’s autonomy.

Need for more intervention

Covid-19, and uncertainties around the duration of this pandemic, necessitates interventions on multiple fronts, both short-term and longer-term, in the public and private sphere, to address the specific, multiple intersecting vulnerabilities women face. Beyond addressing the structural drivers which contribute to gender-based violence in South Africa, there is a need for more immediate and medium-term interventions to ensure women’s freedom, safety and well-being in the public and private spheres.

There have been proactive efforts by the South African Police Services, government departments and civil society organisations to lend support to victims of domestic abuse during the lockdown. These include online and additional telephonic reporting and counselling services, a
national gender-based violence hotline, and Thuthuzela Care Centres – dedicated centres that provide a one-stop service for victims of sexual violence at state hospitals. They have remained open during lockdown. Whilst these efforts are encouraging, more longer-term solutions need to be implemented.

Chief amongst these is the increased delivery of suitable and quality housing for victims of domestic abuse. Currently there is no government department specifically mandated to build shelters or provide housing for victims of domestic violence. The National Department for Social Development (DSD), through its Integrated National Programme of Action Addressing Violence Against Women and Children (2013–2018), makes a commitment to the provision of a range of shelter services to victims of domestic abuse. However, the responsibility for the establishment, management and maintenance of shelter services still falls on non-profit organisations, with limited funding provided by DSD for these purposes.

Where shelter is provided, the duration of stay normally does not extend beyond six months. More options for the provision of medium- to longer-term housing for victims of domestic abuse and their children should be considered and provided. One option might be an intergovernmental effort between DSD, municipalities and other government departments like the Department of Human Settlements and Public Works to investigate how public (and privately-owned) vacant, unused buildings could be redeveloped into emergency housing for abused women.

With the relaxation of some of the restrictions on movement and gathering in public spaces under level 2 of the lockdown, built environment interventions designed with the specific needs of women and other vulnerable groups in mind need greater attention. Safe public spaces, social facilities and measures to make public transport safer would enhance women’s mobility, freedom and enjoyment of public spaces.

South African Men in Covid-19

By Malose Langa and Bandile Bertrand Leopeng

The unprecedented consequences of the coronavirus disease outbreak are being experienced by every country in the world. Beyond the immediate public health risks of Covid–19, many men, women, children and families find themselves in fast-evolving situations that have changed the daily practice of education and childcare. They have also raised awareness of methods of protection or treatment of all types of illnesses. Until recently, there have been restrictions on movement and the temporary closure of certain sectors of the economy in South Africa, which have resulted in immediate or impending losses of household income. Some men have reported during phases of lockdown:

• feelings of powerlessness, insecurity, and not being in control.
• Being afraid of the virus itself.
• Feeling crowded at home, or feeling isolated and having a hard time without social contacts and intimate relationships.
• Worrying about health, family, or finances.

Obviously, this affects their mental health, talking about their feelings and emotions. Obviously, this affects their mental health, as the only option left is to internalise all issues until they become too overwhelmed. When this happens, the release usually comes in the form of alcohol abuse, which then leads to other social problems such as anger outbursts or violent behaviour.

It is therefore important that we work with men in our communities during this time and beyond to assist them to resolve their emotional challenges. As part of this shift and transformation, we need to start admitting that men have unreasonable expectations placed upon them, many of which do not match their socio-economic realities. When it comes to being able to cope with life challenges, men are supposed to be un-bothered, unemotional, and stoic. Men have generally been socialised to

“Real” men
These circumstances certainly place more pressure on men, given the social and cultural construct that they need to be breadwinners of their households. The lockdown has already resulted in widespread job losses and many economies worldwide are soon likely to face recession. Due to the social construct that it is the sole responsibility of men to provide for their families, some men may feel a sense of loss or loss of manhood due to their inability to contribute financially at this time.

As a result of this, many men experience severe depression and anxiety attacks, but many are less likely to seek any professional help. In a 1976 book called The Forty-nine Percent Majority, Deborah David and Robert Brannon call this “no sissy stuff” – men are expected to avoid

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mask their fear and treat life-threatening situations with contempt and hostility. A study on Men and Covid-19 found that men “tend to downplay risk and are resistant to risk reduction policies”. This view may help to explain why some men have struggled to abide by lockdown regulations, which in some instances increased their risk of contracting the virus.

However, it is important that class and racial differences amongst men are acknowledged. This echoes the view of Professor Robert Morrell, in his book Changing men in Southern Africa, that “there is no one, typical South African masculinity”. Instead, there are rather different masculinities, to acknowledge the variety of interpretive forms that masculinity can take. Male experiences vary across socio–historical–cultural formations.

While statistics of domestic violence during lockdown dominated media headlines, it is equally important to report how some men took to the streets to raise awareness about the scourge of gender-based violence. For example, on 21st June 2020, Father’s Day in South Africa, actor Sello Maake Ka-Ncube led a group of hundreds of fathers and sons from the Act Now Movement in a march to the Union Buildings against the scourge of gender-based violence. The movement has called on men across the country to change their violent behaviour. Mr Ka-NCube, the movement’s interim spokesperson, handed over a memorandum to the presidency to demand that actions are taken to end gender-based violence in South Africa.

Men and the alcohol ban
It is also important to comment about men and the banning of alcohol. While men are at increased risk for substance abuse, especially during social isolation, the ban on alcohol has also afforded some men the opportunity to introspect and decide what type of fathers and husbands they want to be. Some men, recorded in an article written by Josh Levs, shared stories of having to assist with house chores and taking care of their children, challenging traditional stereotypes of manhood and fatherhood that it is the sole role of women to care for children. However, with more men staying at home during lockdown, some men were taking on greater caregiving responsibilities such as assisting children with homework/online lessons, grocery shopping, playing games with their families and knowing more about their children’s social lives. All these interactions facilitated bonds between fathers, and children as well as their partners.

It is important that these positive images of masculinities are popularised in the media rather than always depicting men as violent and aggressive. Some men during this global pandemic displayed attitudes of care, love, and nurturance. This supports Lynne Segal’s argument, in her Slow motion: Changing Masculinities Changing Men, that crises can offer opportunities for heightened awareness around positive change and promote the importance of men’s voices. The current situation has provided the opportunity amongst other men to disrupt gender stereotypes and change traditional masculine narratives. Household chores and caring for children should be shared as part of advancing equality amongst men and women.

**Professor Malose Langa** is Associate Professor of Psychology at Wits University.

**Bandile Bertrand Leopeng** is a Registered Counselling Psychologist, Boxer, Trainer and PhD candidate at Wits University.
In his article, *C’EST LA LUTTE FINALE*, Mike Davis argues: “The current pandemic on a global scale exposes and widens the existential divides within and between societies, and reminds us that the survival of the poorest fifth of humanity is increasingly at question.” It’s an important piece in many regards, but there is a significant omission – the word ‘women’ does not appear in almost 9,000 words.

In this article, I start to explore the impact of the pandemic, and the sharp economic crisis that has deepened in its wake for 52 per cent of humanity – for women. The current political situation is both laying bare and exacerbating existing inequalities. To assess it without making women’s position central will not adequately equip us to respond to either the profound challenges or the seeds of positive change facing us.

While statistics indicate that a greater proportion of men than women have died as a direct result of Covid-19, in other significant ways women’s position is more adversely affected.

The International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) *June report on the world of work* puts it like this:

“In contrast to previous crises, women’s employment is at greater risk than men’s, particularly owing to the impact of the downturn on the service sector. At the same time, women account for a large proportion of workers in front-line occupations, especially in the health and social care sectors. Moreover, the increased burden of unpaid care brought by the crisis affects women more than men.”

And the informal economy?

This quote from the ILO ignores the informal economy, which has also been particularly impacted.

People working in the informal economy in the vast majority of cases live hand to mouth, with neither savings nor food supplies to fall back on if they are not able to engage in their “normal” activity. These two billion workers represented 60 per cent of the world’s employed population in 2018. For many of them, to quarantine if they show symptoms of the virus, or to physically distance while selling their wares, is impossible. This raises the serious risk of further spread of the virus. The fact that a high proportion live in dense shanty towns exacerbates the risks even further.

In its April 2018 report, *Women and men in the informal economy; a statistical picture, (third edition)* the ILO notes;

“Countries with the lowest level of GDP per capita tend to have the highest level of informality … The gender gap in the share of informal employment is also more likely to be positive in countries with the lowest level of GDP per capita, which means that women are more likely to be in informal employment than men. The gender
If your pre-pandemic life, working on cheap public transport, several hours walk from where you live, and there is no public transport because of the pandemic, you cannot sell your goods. If you are a sex worker, whether working on the streets or as an escort, the market for your services is severely affected by lockdown in many countries.

For many informal workers, the repression and militarisation that have accompanied lockdowns (from Duerte’s Philippines to Bolsonaro’s Brazil, from Orban’s Hungary to Trump’s USA), make their lives even more precarious. This is particularly the case for those whose migration status and/or lack of gender conformity push them further to marginalisation, multiple whammy.

Women have lost income, as sectors such as hospitality are disproportionately affected by the crisis. There have been measures of partial protection, mainly in the global north, where workers have not initially been sacked but laid off and paid a proportion of their normal income by the state. But even here women are disproportionately hit.

If your pre-pandemic life, working two or more jobs, left you on the edge of poverty, then the loss of even part of that income is even more disastrous. And many of these jobs will permanently disappear as the crisis deepens. And for many women, employment also means some independence and self worth.

Significant numbers of women work in socially necessary services — health, education, care, food production and distribution, and transport. In these sectors, the provision of personal protective equipment and other essential health and safety measures has often been life threateningly lacking. This criminal deficit has been met with resistance, as we can see from the hunger strikes of doctors in Pakistan in April or the action of Nigerian doctors in June and Zimbabwean nurses and doctors as I write. Women, and particularly migrant and indigenous women, are more likely to work in the least protected jobs within these sectors e.g. as cleaners in the health service or in care homes.

“Stay home stay safe” is dangerous for those of us for whom home is a site of abuse. In 2017, 38 per cent of murders of women in Europe were committed by a male intimate partner. 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner in their lifetime.

This also applies to younger people including LGBTQI youth forced back into parental homes by the economic crisis, or deprived of the social support that community organisations or places to socialise previously offered.

The dangers are compounded where increased criminalisation and militarisation accompanied lockdown. Domestic labour

The most gendered effect of the pandemic is the reprivatisation — and feminisation — of domestic work. Women spent more than 3.2 times as much time on unpaid work as men before the pandemic. The gap between the hours of domestic work carried out by women and by men was narrowing very, very slowly.

Food poverty has deepened during the pandemic including in the global north. The lengthening of queues in shops and food projects, the shortages of supplies of basic staples as well as the closure of cafes and restaurants, disproportionately affect women. Women often make sure that children and adult males are fed before themselves.

But childcare is also central. For millions of people the informal support that was central to the patchwork that makes up childcare, from older relatives and family friends, has been torn away. The fact that the pandemic itself is generally more often fatal amongst older people is a factor, but so too are the effects of lockdown and sometimes militarisation. Schools have closed in 190 countries according to the UN. Where online education has been provided, this has served to illustrate the sharp digital and other forms of poverty that exist in working class communities. Living in overcrowded homes is not conducive to learning, even where individual motivation and parental support exist.

Even for those working from home, the differentials are sharp. In households where two adults in a heterosexual relationship live with children and both work at home, there are many anecdotes that tell how women’s working day is interrupted to deal with children while men seem much more able to ignore them.

So the differences between the levels of domestic labour carried out by women and by men are almost certainly increasing again.

And there is a vicious circle between increased domestic labour and unemployment for women. A survey conducted in Nairobi’s informal settlements, for example, revealed that 42% of women were unable to get paid work because of an increased care and domestic workload caused by the pandemic. In Britain, half of working mothers said they were unable to find the...
childcare they needed to return to work.

Context of struggle
Objective reality seems bleak and governments and bosses are determined to make sure that the costs of the crisis are borne by the already dispossessed. But we are not passive observers of what is happening to our lives, livelihoods and communities.

In recent years we have seen a new wave of mass feminist movements and an increased participation and leadership of women in mass broad protest movements and uprisings. So internationally women went into the pandemic in a better position to resist backlashs than would otherwise have been the case.

The growth and international spread of the Black Lives Matter movement since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 is impressive. The movement was originally created by three women in 2013 to protest police violence in the United States. Now, millions, particularly of young people, have mobilised. Discussions about the legacy of slavery, of imperialism and racism were previously the preserve of Black activists, and to a lesser extent of the left. Now they are extensively covered by significant sections of the mainstream media.

And political debate is extending on other questions too. Across the globe, existing community organisations, spawned to deal with previous disasters, have reanimated, while others have sprung into existence, dealing with food poverty, isolation, state violence and more.

The pandemic has led to discussion about what kind of work is valuable in itself (creates what Marxists call "use value") and what forms of work have the primary function of producing profits for the employers through the extraction of surplus value from the labour of workers.

Food production and distribution, education, health and local transport are, as already noted, sectors in which large numbers of women work. This is the labour that holds societies together. But it is not valued, economically or socially, precisely because it is seen as traditional women’s work.

Social reproduction
Despite decades of campaigning by feminists and sections of the labour movement, women’s position in the labour market is largely circumscribed by what is assumed to be our "natural" role in the family.

The labour of cooking, cleaning, caring for our immediate and extended families, nursing, educating and socialising of our young is work carried out by women – and for no pay. Family forms and the specificities of women’s unpaid labour, not to mention the division of labour between older and younger women, vary significantly in different societies. But use this opportunity to demand a stronger care sector in its widest sense – more care, education, youth services; what feminist economists call purple jobs, alongside the green jobs that environmentalists demand. And like green jobs we need to organise and socialise of our young is work carried out by women - and for no pay.

education systems) they are not valued even when they are transferred into the labour market itself.

This is seen most sharply in paid domestic work, where the division of tasks between childcare, cleaning, shopping, cooking – and not infrequently providing sexual “services” to the men of the family – is entirely at the employer’s will. Many women live where they work and many are migrant workers, with few if any rights, making them even more vulnerable to many forms of abuse.

Even where public services exist and therefore there is a great division between say education and health care, genderised pay differentials exist. In many countries, for example, teachers for young children are worse paid than those for older ones, and more feminised.

Questions about how to transform jobs in destructive industries, from arms production to fossil fuel-driven transport, into a green new deal based on renewable energy and social justice for the global south are being popularised by ecocsocialists. Given the depth of environmental devastation, it is indeed an urgent discussion. This is the case also for trade unions who too often react to the economic crisis in a purely defensive manner, more under the slogan of build back any old how. They forget that there are no jobs on a dead planet. But we also need to use this opportunity to demand a stronger care sector in its widest sense – more care, education, youth services; what feminist economists call purple jobs, alongside the green jobs that environmentalists demand. And like green jobs we need to organise and socialise of our young is work carried out by women - and for no pay.

Terry Conway is a socialist feminist, a leading member of Socialist Resistance in Britain and a member of the editorial team of International Viewpoint, the English language website of the Fourth International.
This is not an accident
By Lauren Paremoer

Women, particularly black working class women, are bearing the brunt of the Covid–19 pandemic. This is not a matter of bad luck; it is not simply accidental. It is an entirely predictable and persistent effect of society being organised and structured for the primary benefit of people who are generally not expected to fulfil routine childcare responsibilities; who are not expected to cook and clean; who are not expected to be kind, forgiving and understanding even when they are tired, angry, bruised and battered. Historically, these people have been men. Relatively unburdened by the double burden of housework and paid work, they have typically been the citizens and activists at the forefront of shaping the institutions that govern every aspect of our lives.

Revival of the state
A lot of writing about the pandemic has rightly focused on exposing how the public sector has been killed off by neoliberal globalisation. However, the pandemic is also demonstrating, admittedly in a very limited way, that concerted political action within and outside the state can reanimate the service provision functions of the state. The South African public sector has been temporarily resuscitated through building field hospitals, supporting rapid and large-scale medical research, making temporary social grants available, and expanding gender-based violence (GBV) monitoring and support infrastructures.

Life-making work
People have been neglected and abandoned by the state and market for decades. So these modest interventions have been lifesaving. This is significant. However, the shape of these interventions risks entrenching the idea that women should, at great expense to themselves, continue to be burdened with the daily responsibility of “life-making under capitalism.”

Tithi Bhattacharya uses this term to describe the work of cooking, cleaning, childcare, birthing and emotional support that produces the workers who are integral to the “thing-making” functions of capitalism. The capitalist system prioritises the profits generated by “thing-making”. Meanwhile, the gendered idea of women as loving and caring wives, mothers and grandmothers pushes them to do “life-making” work for free in the home.

For decades, South African women have mobilised around the idea that this gendered division of labour within the household is at the heart of their sexual, political and social domination. At the supposed moment of liberation, in 1994, the Women’s Charter for Effective Equality declared that,

“At the heart of women’s marginalisation is the patriarchal order that confines women to the domestic arena and reserves for men the arena where political power and authority reside. Conventionally, democracy and human rights have been defined and interpreted in terms of men’s experiences. Society has been organised and its institutions structured for the primary benefit of men.”

Lockdown measures have increased the amount and intensity of care work that women must do, especially where men in the household don’t do much of it. Due to social distancing regulations, women have also lost the informal support networks of family and friends outside the household. Children can no longer be sent to grandmothers and aunts when parents need to work. School closures mean women are working longer hours to take care of children and support their education. More people at home all day means more cleaning. Extra meal planning and preparation is needed to stretch the food budget further, especially when faced with the huge appetites of children and teenagers. High rates of Covid–19 cases mean more time caring for the sick and bereft, and all those worried about getting sick.

For centuries, South African women have been doing this work without recognition of how their labour contributes to economic productivity, and without significant monetary or infrastructure support from the state. The migrant labour system offers one clear example of this. For decades, the South African economy has depended on the mines. In turn, the mines have depended on women labouring under desperate conditions in the homelands to keep future workers alive. Returning mineworkers are often ill or injured due to their horrible working conditions. Women have had to keep them comfortable and healthy in the years before death. Similarly, it is the invisible labour of women living close to mines that has offered miners care and support during the months at work, when they are far removed from their kin and isolated from much of the surrounding community.

Lockdown simply assumes that state infrastructures can rely on women to subsidise the costs of keeping us all alive, at little or no extra cost to the public purse. This is sharply reflected in the fact that women receiving childcare grants only qualify for a small increase — an additional R500 directly paid to each caregiver, regardless of the number of people they are caring for. And yet the monetary value of care work is much more than this. Oxfam has estimated that, globally, the unpaid care work of women can be valued at a minimum of $10.8 trillion annually. In South Africa, it is estimated that in 2010 the value of work done in the household was worth R749.9 billion. Women were responsible for almost 75% of this household production. Over the course of a lifetime, researchers estimate that South African women “spend 71% of their productive time on household production at every age.” This means they have less time for waged work, leisure, and education. It also means a diminished presence in public life, and less time for political work that builds their political power and voice.

De–privatisation an exception?
Why does it matter whether life–making work is done in public or private, individualised or collectivised? The past months have shown the necessity...
having a physical space to do life-making work and share it with others. And beyond this, a space for making political demands about who does paid and unpaid life-making work, how this work is valued, and where it is done. Emergency field hospitals, and quarantine centres are amongst the most striking examples of this. They demonstrate that the state, when pressed, really does have the capacity to reorganise its work around the principle of care. Enabling these places to become infrastructures of the public good made a fundamental difference in saving lives.

However, despite the success of field hospitals, this specific example of de–privatisation is still considered an exception. In mid–August, for example, the Western Cape government announced that the Hospital of Hope at the Cape Town Convention Centre would be closed, as the pandemic had peaked. Therefore, it argues, it was important not to “over–provide” care capacity when it is no longer needed. This, despite all the pain and suffering caused by ongoing and “normalised” threats to wellness in the province such as rape, domestic violence, malnutrition, and homelessness.

Public facilities not fit
It is also striking that the major field hospitals were set up in cavernous convention centres, the modern–day cathedrals of transnational capitalism, rather than community centres. Field hospitals were needed partly because of the poor state of public health facilities nation–wide. During the Covid surge there were simply not enough hospitals or clinics that could adequately care for patients needing to isolate and receive care.

Why were convention centres chosen? Perhaps because by and large community centres, especially those big enough, well maintained enough, and equipped with working kitchens and bathrooms, have deteriorated, been abandoned, or for the past few years have simply not been built. This absence of public meeting places within communities also means the absence of places outside the household and family where routine care work can be shared amongst “strangers”. That’s a sharing that builds relationships, shares problems, organises, and builds solidarities around common problems that are no longer isolated within private households.

Buildings that are free to use and are community–managed provide the material conditions that enable voluntary action that is somewhat autonomous from the state and the private household. The Covid–19 pandemic has again shown that the household can also function as a site of labour exploitation, precariousness, and violence. It is not necessarily a refuge from these dynamics that women also encounter at work. Street committees, churches, schools, or (probably, given the sexual division of labour) women’s organisations require physical space to socialise the kind of reproductive labour – like childcare – that falls mainly to women. This is labour that has been increasingly privatised within the nuclear family as a result of neoliberal public administration policies that commodify and privatise public space.

This raises the question: can we think about this crisis as a way to expand the public sector in ways that are overtly life-affirming? Ways that collectivise the “life work” that women in private households are socialised to take responsibility for? Not to limit public assistance to giving grants that further compound the notion that private individuals, mostly women, should be primarily responsible for the work of caring. How are single mothers supposed to “self–isolate”, work or shop for groceries – even with an additional R500 grant – without the socialisation of reproductive labour that allows them the time and energy to do so?

The various soup kitchens and feeding schemes started by community activists during lockdown are one example of how life–work can be collectivised. However, at the moment there is no public support for these and similar efforts, such as community child care centres or public laundries. The gendered life–work that takes place in households, and the gendered safety risks faced by women and LGBTQI+ people, are not integral to decisions about what public infrastructure to prioritise, how to design it, and where to build it.

Through their political work, the Combahee River Collective, a grassroots black feminist collective active in the USA during the 1970s, came to be convinced that, “a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will not guarantee our liberation. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives… we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions …We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

The Covid–19 epidemic highlights just how true this insight is. Women’s supposedly “natural” inclination to care for others, together with their intense anxiety to secure the resources they need to run their households, pressure them into doing paid work in unsafe, abusive, and traumatic conditions. The words of the essential workers in these pages clearly show this. In addition, women’s reproductive labour continues to subsidise a patriarchal, racist, capitalist system that has offered them mainly low wage, precarious, and now disappearing jobs in the informal and service sectors. This is not bad luck. It is not an accident.

Lauren Paremoer is a member of the Rita Edwards Collective and works in the Political Studies Department at the University of Cape Town.
Universal Basic Income Grant
a key campaign

By Amandla correspondent

IN JUNE THIS YEAR, PRESIDENT CYRIL Ramaphosa gave an address in which he explicitly tied women’s lack of financial autonomy and their vulnerability to gender based violence. He stated that,

“It has been particularly important for us to open up personal care services, because this is an industry that predominantly employs women. The last three months have been particularly difficult for the millions of women who work as hairdressers, in spas, as therapists and technicians. Many of these are businesses owned by women and are a source of income in the informal sector. Giving women the necessary support to become financially independent is the greatest of priorities, especially now. It is with the heaviest of hearts that I stand before the women and girls of South Africa this evening to talk about another pandemic that is raging in our country – the killing of women and children by the men of our country... At a time when the pandemic has left us all feeling vulnerable and uncertain, violence is being unleashed on women and children with a brutality that defies comprehension.”

The speech identifies the need for tougher policing, more effective prosecution of perpetrators and greater provision of shelters as key interventions against GBV. It acknowledges women’s precarious position in the labour market and the structural constraints – intensified under Covid-19 lockdown measures – of earning a living wage.

However, having said that financial independence for women is crucial, the president then fails to take the material step necessary to begin to achieve it. Like other government efforts over the past months to mitigate social insecurity, he failed to acknowledge widespread calls for a basic income grant as a crucial mechanism for improving social welfare in general – and particularly for black women. Because black women are over-represented amongst the unemployed, under-employed, precariously employed, and in the unpaid “household economy.”

The introduction of a basic income grant of at least R1,268 (upper bound poverty line) would effectively reduce absolute poverty (at least according to Stats SA) to 0% in the country. (The upper-bound poverty line is based on a “food poverty line” of R$85 per person per month plus a linked amount of “non-food expenses”). Absolute poverty is defined as the minimum income necessary for a household to meet basic needs.

But equally important, it could also help to restructure work in a variety of positive ways. A BIG could lead to improving the quality of jobs. It would also be an important step to recognising the unpaid social reproductive work, generally done by women. Crucially, in the context of a public health crisis, a BIG would enable the poor to buy the essential goods they cannot currently afford. This would result in improved nutrition and other social determinants of health.

Origins of BIG

The idea of a BIG was first raised in the 1997 White Paper on Social Welfare. It came up again in a discussion between COSATU and government ahead of the Presidential Jobs Summit in 1998. In 2000, the government appointed the Taylor Committee to investigate ways to extend “the social security system to provide comprehensive coverage for all”. The committee report in 2002 proposed the implementation of a basic income grant of at least R100 to address different aspects of poverty, to stimulate local consumption–driven economic growth and job creation, and to lay a foundation for sustainable livelihoods.

Fast forward to the age of Covid–19 and the lockdown measures required to flatten the curve of the outbreak. The increased precariousness related to that has meant that the need for a basic income is more relevant than ever. So, almost twenty years since the BIG Coalition, the demand for a basic income grant has resurfaced. Now the demand is made by many others (some of whom seldom agree), including the ANC, business, NGOs, social movements and academics.

However, the economic and political context in which a campaign for a BIG is re–emerging is important when thinking about the potential of the grant to improve women’s autonomy. The depth of the crisis of social reproduction in South Africa has intensified in recent years. The costs of food, water, electricity, and transport have steadily increased. The share of profit going to wages has steadily declined.

In addition, the post–transition period has witnessed the weakening of the women’s movement, and of women-only structures in unions and political parties. This is significant. Historically, autonomous women’s structures have
been crucial, in the words of the Chair of the Taylor Committee, in arguing against receiving “a bigger piece of a rotten pie; they want to change the ingredients that go into the pie’ so that the end result will be beneficial for all.”

A BIG is one crucial part of this process of changing the ingredients of the pie. Specific, gendered political demands have been another, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s. The New Women’s Movement’s “Cost of Living” campaign serves as one example of this. Members explicitly rejected the government’s attempts to stigmatise their demands for an income level that could meet the costs of simply staying alive. In protesting the government’s plans to cut the child maintenance grant in the 1990s, the women in the campaign protested: “We are not lazy drunks who don’t like to work but find ourselves dependent on welfare sometimes. We are dignified women who struggle to feed, clothe, and educate our children.”

Need for autonomous women’s organisation

During the liberation struggle, women’s demands were often perceived as being in conflict with more dominant political cultures. Across the political spectrum, these were defined by the entanglement of the liberal capitalist, nationalist “left”, as well the configuration of the broader political terrain in which such a demand was articulated. The history of the South African women’s movement shows that the post-1994, policy reforms aimed at strengthening women’s financial autonomy could only have emerged in the context of political mobilisation by relatively autonomous women’s groups. These groups allowed women to explore and express their customary patriarchal regimes. These dominant patriarchal political cultures focused on securing equality in the public domain. By and large they embraced a “gender-neutral” idea of citizenship. Today this ideological constraint remains.

BIG part of broader transformation

It is therefore essential that the demands for a BIG extend beyond a technical or pragmatic intervention. We must instead ensure their positive transformative potential. The fight for a BIG has to be part of a much wider programme calling for much greater social reforms. The BIG must exist alongside other forms of institutionalised social protection in the move towards the provision of universal public services. These services must socialise and/or remunerate the reproductive work currently shouldeled by women. And they must increasingly involve men in doing reproductive work historically borne by women.

The level of the grant must be needs-based. And evaluating these needs should not simply be a technical exercise. Rather, there should be a process of engagement with unemployed people – particularly women and youth – in order for them to articulate what their needs are. This will ensure that this is a fight that comes from below rather than one determined by “experts”, culminating in a technical exercise.

Ultimately, we must win a basic income grant that is able to combat inequality and restructure work in a positive way, as a means to an end and not an end in itself. This will require massive struggles from below that prioritise, rather than invalidate, women’s expressions of their gender specific political demands.
Treasury inflicts unnecessary pain: it must stop

By Busi Sibeko

We are once again being told that “there is no alternative” to austerity – the cutting of expenditure to address debt during economic downturns. The general public is being forced into “disaffected consent” to the current status quo, on the basis that we don’t have a choice. This has been strengthened by Treasury’s insistence that government spending makes no difference and is futile in the face of rampant corruption. The current moment reminds us of how austerity was brought into the public consciousness after the 2008/9 Global Financial crisis (GFC). It created a new normal.

After the GFC, there was a brief stimulus (increased spending). Then, many countries across the world implemented austerity in pursuit of economic recovery. There was a concerted effort to redefine the global financial crisis as a supposed “fiscal crisis” – a crisis due to government spending, rather than the systemic irresponsible behaviour of finance capital. There was a moral appeal to shared sacrifice, suffering, and collective obligation to correct the failures of the fiscal crisis – this was the moralisation of austerity.

Across the world, governments used the analogy of a household budget to provide a familiar logic to government finances. It made sense in the public consciousness that government, like a household, couldn’t spend more than it has.

Since at least 2014/15, South Africa has followed suit, and the public has been made to believe that austerity is the only viable solution to our economic woes. It has been disguised as “fiscal consolidation,” “rebalancing”, “cost containment” and “stabilising the public finances”. But the dominant narrative has been that cutting national budget expenditure will help to address South Africa’s “runaway” debt. Now, this logic has seeped into the economic and social relief measures for Covid-19, and the public has deliberately been duped into believing that the hands of government are tied.

Before the budget, Minister Mboweni stated that “we’re no longer as rich as we once were”. The implicit message was that the Covid-19 response would be constrained by our income in the same way that a household would be. The Supplementary Budget was meant to fund the Covid-19 rescue package. Instead, it was re-defined as a moment to tackle our “fiscal crisis”. So it states that the “Supplementary Budget sets out a roadmap to stabilise debt, by improving our spending patterns, and creating a foundation for economic revival”.

It is therefore not surprising that, despite the looming socio-economic crisis, the net increase to the original 2019 Budget was just R36 billion. That’s less than 1% of GDP. Like the 2008/9 responses, the increase for this year, according to Treasury, needs to be accompanied, in the medium-term, by budget cuts so that we can achieve a surplus. This poses grave risks. Over the past decade, many governments who implemented austerity underestimated the importance of government expenditure in preserving the economy and aiding recovery.

Social security

The President’s package indicated a R50 billion allocation towards social grants. The Supplementary Budget allocated only R41 billion. Low uptake was the justification. Meanwhile, there has been a systematic exclusion of applicants. The criteria have been particularly punitive for women who are registered care givers within the system. The logic has been that they are already “beneficiaries” of government programmes. So they should not be recipients of additional government relief. As a result of being a care giver, these women have been excluded from the Covid-19 special grant. This is despite women having higher unemployment rates than men, with black women having the highest rate of 46.2% prior to the lockdown.

In addition, despite calls that grant increases should be for each beneficiary (child), the government has proceeded with increases for each care giver.

Job protection and creation

Only 6% of the R100 billion the President set aside for the protection of jobs is actually allocated for this year. International evidence shows that successful economic relief and stimulus packages have to be timely (and temporary and well targeted). Despite this, now, well over 100 days later, there are no concrete
plans for using these funds.

The Supplementary Budget vaguely allocates the remainder of the money to the medium term. This is despite there being no public discussion about how the remainder of the R94 billion could have been utilised for sorely-needed emergency relief.

Health

R20 billion was allocated to health spend in the R500 billion package. That seems like a sizeable sum. However, after taking into account the reprioritisations and “baseline reductions”, the net increase to the Health Vote, despite the current health crisis, is actually only R2.9 billion. And this comes after sustained previous per capita declines in healthcare expenditure.

There have been many reports of corruption in procurement for health-related goods and services. So the public has become wary that the money is being utilised poorly. Alarmingly, given our recent history, a National Treasury official stated that “we might have been naïve in terms of thinking people would do the right thing, that they would follow the law and make sure the focus is on the pandemic and impact thereof”. This fails to take responsibility for the lack of adequate institutional planning to avoid corruption.

Past experiences demonstrate that economic packages have an increased risk of corruption and fraud. This is because there is more limited oversight in the face of the need for speedy implementation. This blunder has been followed by a change in procurement guidelines. And again, this corruption feeds into the narrative that government spending does not make a difference.

Credit guarantee scheme

According to National Treasury, at the time of the Supplementary Budget R10 billion of the R200 billion allocated to the business loan guarantee scheme had been accessed. That’s a fraction of the need. Uptake was highlighted as a key obstacle, with criteria being too stringent. In line with the moralisation of austerity, this limited uptake has two components: 1. it gives the illusion that government is safeguarding public finances, and 2. the low uptake argument makes it seem as though it is the fault of the businesses, not of the government.

This fails to acknowledge that stringent criteria like this hinder the success of the economic intervention itself. So they have massive ramifications for business survival. In other countries, credit to companies has been made rapidly available. The US Small Business Administration disbursed $349 billion in 13 days through an online portal. And they implemented a second stimulus programme aimed at helping SMMEs.

The national budget is not like a household budget

The national budget is not like a single household budget. First, the government has the ability to directly control money supply within the economy through tax and monetary policy. They can generate more revenue by raising taxes, and they can print money, make available credit and borrow from the public. Second, government spending has only served as an intellectual cover to service delivery and harm the economy. We have had years of cutting budgets, and yet we pay increasing amounts to service the debt. And the debt is still increasing.

The choice of austerity is not purely a technical one. It reflects a political process. We must resist efforts to moralise us into thinking that there are no alternatives. The national budget is capable of much more than a household budget.

Busi Sibeko is an economist and researcher at the Institute for Economic Justice.
HE “CORPORATE FINANCE Faction” in the governing party (can we call it the CFF?) finally got its desired $4.3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As Amandla! explains in the “What do you mean by?” article on Page 38, the government’s motivation for this and other dollar loans doesn’t hold water. South Africa is not running out of foreign currency to pay for its imports, be they oil, machines or debt service in dollars. The IMF loan will be changed into around R75 billion and used to fund a shrinking public service budget, despite a range of alternatives at hand. These alternatives are political no-go zones.

The Treasury and the SA Reserve Bank sent a “Letter of Intent” to the IMF as part of its application for the loan. This letter is one key to understanding what is about to happen. It sets out a homebrewed structural adjustment programme. And it mimics points made by an IMF report in July about government finances – for example, it repeats the idea of a “debt ceiling”.

Cutting public services
All in all, the budget plans will put hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs on the line. But let us first deal with the Treasury’s talk of reducing “consumption” in its presentations to NEDLAC and parliament in August.

What ministers Tito Mboweni, David Masondo and others call “consumption” is actually delivery of basic services. It includes the operations of clinics, hospitals, schools and water treatment. And the Covid pandemic has revealed to all what the increasingly outraged majority already knew – that most households don’t even have running water.

It deserves to be repeated that the 2018 Presidential Summit acknowledged 37,000 vacancies in the public health sector. This sector walked into the Covid crisis short of 37,000 people that it so desperately needed. With its Supplementary Budget the government is being quite clear. The figures don’t lie. We will have to live without fixing any of the problems with basic services for the next three years.

Cutting public jobs
The public sector job-cut plan had already been spelled out in the 2020 Budget Review. That was a month before the lockdown and the Covid crisis hit. Studying the numbers makes it clear that public sector employment is at the heart of the “public sector wage bill” debate.

Sponsored by Mail & Guardian and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC) hosted a debate in July between Deputy Finance Minister David Masondo and six non-corporate economists. The Minister was asked how many jobs will be lost if R160 billion is cut over three years from the “public sector wage bill”. This was the plan announced in the 2020 Budget and upheld in the Supplementary Budget of July.

Minister Masondo replied that this is before the court. But the only thing that is before the Court is implementation of this year’s wage increase agreed with the public sector unions three years ago. There is no issue of employment numbers there.

According to the Court papers, the government wants to backtrack on
R37.8 billion in wage increases for some 1.3 million national and provincial state employees. This corresponds exactly to the first year’s cut announced in the 2020 Budget: “R37.8 billion”.

However, the total reduction over three years is R160 billion. Year two and three are minus R54.9 billion (2021/22) and minus R67.5 billion (2022/23); in sum, a reduction of R122 billion.

It will be impossible to let wage levels be hollowed out by inflation for another two years. Even if the Treasury wins in court, a 0% wage increase can only happen this year. In the second and third years, the reductions in the wage bill will be made through job cuts.

According to the 2019 Mid Term Budget, the average cost of a public sector job is R393,000. This average excludes part-time employees, and over 200,000 very low paid EPWP and community health workers. These are precisely the workers who have been revealed as so crucial during the pandemic.

If we accept that the figure really is that high, then over 300,000 public sector jobs will be gone by 2024. The maths is simple – just divide the R122 billion two-year wage bill cut by the average annual labour cost for one job.

Walk into a clinic, a child-care centre, a public school or a hospital and look around: job cuts in the public service sector will affect women more than men. And this in an unprecedented period of mass unemployment and small business bankruptcies, where women again are in the majority.

Early retirement pipe dreams
It is inconceivable that a cut in public employment of this magnitude can be achieved through early retirements, something mentioned at NEDLAC in August. In the 2019 Budget Review, the Treasury already offered early retirement to 30,000 employees. NEHAWU officials told Amandla! that about 4,000 accepted. The Treasury thought their package wouldn’t affect pension levels, but this was wrong. That’s why very few accepted the offer.

In addition, the Supplementary Budget includes R231 billion of unspecified cuts in public spending over two years, starting from April next year. They are clearly a part of the Treasury’s structural adjustment program. This is no longer conjecture. The directives to the departments before the coming Mid Term Budget (“MTBPS”) in October tell them the aim is for a so called “primary budget surplus” in two and a half years.

And to add to that, the lockdown

Second, domestic production and financing must be prioritised. 25 years of reliance on private international capital has proved fruitless. Capital controls to slow down disruptive financial flows, taxing these flows with a minimum tax and bringing down interest rates permanently: these are standing suggestions from progressive economists. But this would contradict Treasury’s economic policy of promoting free financial flows, speculative or not.

Another delinking suggestion is to make much more use of the Government Employee Pension Fund and the Unemployment Insurance Fund. There is R2 trillion (R2,000 billion) in those funds. Half of this is placed on the stock market. Much more of it should be used for a secure investment in Treasury bonds. This lends funds to the government and will cut government’s debt service costs. It would not hurt pensions at all. Whereas the dip in the stock market before the “actuarial audit” of the GEPF on 31 March will:

An “actuarial factor” is dependent on share prices on exactly that date. This “actuarial factor” also defines the benefits of GEPF. They are not only defined by the final wage and years in service!”

There is a provision in the Reserve Bank Act that allows it to lend new money to the Treasury at whatever low interest rate may be agreed. This is a third proposal for funding that delinks from the finance industry. But of course this deprives private lenders of profit opportunities. Since April, the SARB has shown that it is happy to “print” money – it was prepared to print R200 billion, but only to channel it through the private banks. In fact, only R12 billion has so far actually been lent to business.

The programme was not profitable for Absa, SB, FNB and Nedbank. So it has failed.

The government is clear in its direction: it has pledged allegiance to global finance and it intends to shrink the public service sector to “revive the private sector”. There is a clash ahead, not a social compact.

Dick Forslund is economist and researcher at AIDC.
OMXN ARE THE BACKBONE OF the South African economy and the healthcare system. Yet their backs are being broken under the combined weight of an insatiable extractive financial system and a gender-blind austerity government. While no one could have predicted the when and how, nurses and community healthcare workers (CHWs) have been sounding the alarm on the vulnerability of the healthcare system for decades. The healthcare system exploits the gaps in labour law and policy and deepens the poor treatment of healthcare workers. This has contributed to a compromised healthcare system that is ill prepared for shocks such as Covid–19.

Crisis in healthcare spending
The introduction of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy saw a sharp fall in health expenditure. This was later reversed in the 2000s as health expenditure doubled. It reached R157,547 million in 2012/13 from R72,731 million in 2000/01. There were a number of drivers of this increase:

- The implementation of the HIV/AIDS programme,
- Increasing costs of imported medicines,
- The increase of the public sector wage bill due to the Occupational Specific Dispensation of 2007 (OSD) agreement (a system which revised salary structures uniquely for each identified occupation in the public service), and
- Public sector recruitment.

However, these gains have been drastically reversed since 2012/13 in the period of fiscal austerity – see the graph of public health expenditure.

Private healthcare companies’ profits and payments to shareholders

The situation in the private healthcare sector has worsened the healthcare crisis. The fiscus subsidises the private healthcare system. This has contributed to the fact that the private healthcare sector accounts for half of the country’s national budget but serves the minority of the population. The government gives R35.4 billion in medical tax credits to wealthy taxpayers and the private healthcare sector. It could have used this money to increase the budget allocated to the public healthcare system by more than 60 percent. In addition, between 2016 and 2019, Netcare, Mediclinic and the Lifecare Group made a combined R11.7 billion in net income. Together, they paid R19.2 billion to shareholders in dividends and share buybacks. Over that four-year period, cash paid to shareholders increased by 96%.

The huge pay-outs to shareholders come at a time of major structural constraints on healthcare facilities since the global financial crisis of 2008. Rising unemployment has resulted in many people not being able to afford medical aid and, consequently, private healthcare. Companies use shareholder buybacks to prop up the share price to extract cash for labour brokered workers to cut costs.

Austerity requires that budgeting based on cost containment overrules the healthcare needs of the population. So, restrictions in filled posts have made the chronic understaffing of healthcare workers in the public healthcare sector worse.

Stop women healthcare workers working extreme hours
By Basani Baloyi and Fikile Dikolomela-Lengene

This article draws from the Oxfam South Africa and Young Nurses Indaba Trade Unions (YNITU) report, Right to Healthcare Work; A Right to Health Care for All.

A variety of strategies were used to cut costs. Provincial health departments implemented tight restrictions on filling posts. Non-critical posts were severely reduced, and a deskilling of nursing supervision was introduced to drive down costs.

Austerity requires that budgeting based on cost containment overrules the
strategies of public and private healthcare employers have made working conditions worse, which has had a negative impact on the quality of healthcare provided. Furthermore, the gaps in labour policies allow public and private healthcare employers of nurses and CHWs to further exploit their workforce. Again this contributes to deteriorating working conditions, which also result in poor healthcare delivery. So what are these weaknesses in work time protections as defined by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA)?

Work time protections

The context is one of unequal resources between the private and public sectors, understaffing, and the triple burden of disease. In this context, weak and poorly controlled work time regulations create a significant barrier to achieving a balanced distribution of work, family and personal life and a safe and healthy work environment for healthcare workers. Employers are faced with chronic understaffing of healthcare workers and cuts in admin staff.

They deal with this situation by exploiting gaps in the BCEA provisions on work time. This forces healthcare workers to work inhumane hours of up to 24 hours at a time, with limited breaks.

Compressed Work Time: A normal work time is an 8-hour shift, five days a week, for up to 45 hours per week. Compressed work times extend the daily work time to 12 hours, subject to the provision that they can only work up to 45 hours per week. These hours do not take into account that most healthcare workers are single mothers and suffer from the double burden of care (taking care of patients and their families).

It is not uncommon for nurses and CHWs to wake up as early as 4.30 in the morning in order to complete their reproductive care duties (looking after their personal needs and the needs of their families) before preparing for and travelling to work. Health facilities are not gender responsive – only 5.8 percent of nurses have access to childcare facilities. Therefore, nurses and CHWs are stretched to capacity. Importantly, research shows that nurses who work a 12 hour shift instead of an 8 hour shift provide less quality care than those who work an 8 hour shift.

Emergency Work: Section 6(2) of the BCEA excludes emergency work from work time protections. Emergency work is work that must be done without delay, due to circumstances the employer couldn’t anticipate. It must be work that cannot be performed by employees during ordinary work hours. However, many healthcare workers find they are perpetually called upon to do emergency work, given the chronic understaffing of healthcare workers.

Unrealistic Scope of Work: Working hour regulations for CHWs also contribute to job insecurity. CHW job security is linked to a requirement for CHWs to serve a specified number of households. The Valley Trust, a Centre for Health Promotion in KZN, has recommended that there ought to be two home visits per day. However, the Department of Health has found that five visits are done per day. Currently, one CHW services 101 households. This has led to about 92 percent of staff surveyed reporting that they are suffering from exhaustion. In spite of this, the National Strategy and Policy Framework for 2018/19 – 2023/4 recommends that one CHW services 150–250 households.

End this injustice

Weak work time protections, in the face of the chronic understaffing of the healthcare sector, have a negative effect on the wellbeing of healthcare workers. Many healthcare workers complain of being overworked and exhausted and experience a deterioration in mental health and hypertension. Moreover, work life balance with family responsibilities is compromised. These practices have compromised the quality of healthcare provision and have led to conflicts between patients and healthcare workers. It is no wonder that legal claims against the healthcare system are on the rise. The ILO Nursing Personnel Convention (No.149) was developed in partnership with the World Health Organisation. Its purpose was to close loopholes in the ILO’s Hours of Work Convention to ensure healthcare workers have the same protections as other workers. There is much to be learnt and drawn from this convention to improve working conditions.

We are part of the #Care4Carers campaign fighting for an end to this injustice.

Basani Baloyi is Inequality Programme Lead at Oxfam South Africa.

Fikile Dikolomela-Lengene is a nurse activist and 1st Deputy President of the Young Nurses Indaba Trade Union.
Building the union for the future: linking bottom-up workers education to union revitalisation

By Lucien van der Walt

This article is based on a plenary talk at the Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies, Ilorin, Nigeria, in November 2019.

Discussions of union education and union revitalisation are often framed in ways that pose the issues as simple organisational “fixes.” But looking at the role of union education in union revitalisation poses the primary question: what is the aim? This is not a neutral, technical question, but profoundly political. What are the union’s aims, its role and agenda? These shape what workers’ education should be. This is not just a matter of the topics covered. It also involves the paradigms taught and methodology used.

If the aim is to build democratic, radical and transformative unionism, union education must be aligned with this aim.

Aims and means
First, this means an emphasis on building a strong union base, enabling meaningful workers’ control over the union. Union education programmes must then emphasise empowering large layers of grassroots militants, in carefully constructed and systematic ways. The union, as an organisation, can then be protected (as much as possible) from decapitation by repression and co-option of leaders, and capture and corruption within its structures.

Naturally, workers’ education is not enough to ensure workers’ control: you also need democratic structures based on strict mandates with report-backs. There should be decentralised structures, including in finances, where some subscriptions must be retained by local branches.

But democratic structures are not enough. You need to build consciousness, as any structure can be warped. So, education, then, includes class consciousness and fostering of a moral compass, based on solidarity, empathy, kindness and equality.

Workers’ control, critical thought
Second, workers’ education should promote critical thought. By this, I mean the ability to reason and analyse in an evidence-based, logical manner, not criticising everything for no reason.

A major problem from the 1990s was COSATU moving to a model of political education rooted in the top-down, Marxist–Leninist traditions of the South African Communist Party (SACP). The SACP secured, for the first time in decades, a premier role in mass, public union education.

Let’s be crystal clear: this education has delivered important insights, historical information and anti-capitalist analyses. The SACP and its tradition are key parts of the left and the working-class heritage, historical memory and struggles. But there are also limitations. Effectively, only one theoretical approach was presented; and within that approach, only one application of the ideas was stressed:

- Marxism–Leninism in the Congress tradition;
- The theory of Colonialism of a Special Type (CST), including white monopoly capitalism (WMC); and
- The associated strategy of National Democratic Revolution (NDR), led by the African National Congress (ANC).

Nuance and debate
There was little scope to clarify or evaluate arguments through real comparisons with other views, or to deepen understanding by locating the positions presented in the context of larger debates on the left (including within Marxism–Leninism), or the evolving ideas of the SACP. For example, the SACP’s initial 1920s version of the CST/NDR approach, backed by the Comintern, outlined a radical, SACP-led NDR. SACP leader Albert Nzula dismissed the ANC as national-reformist “good boys” in his book Forced Labour in Colonial Africa, written in Moscow.

Today, this nuance and complexity is missing. The current ANC–COSATU–SACP alliance is treated as a self-evident, inevitable advance. Historically, there were serious debates over the possibilities of a union-driven, class-based transformation of society, as advocated by the much-caricatured 1980s FOSATU “workerists.”

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as advocated by the much-caricatured 1980s FOSATU “workerists”. These have been reduced to stepping stones to the Alliance, as if the Alliance was the only possible outcome – or even the best one, which is by no means obvious.

This does not enable much in the way of exposure to deeper issues. Debates are reduced to strategy, with strategy limited to variants on the dominant model. One result: many know the phrases but are poorly equipped to seriously engage opponents. Others are unclear how theory can be applied to concrete situations, including tough workplace issues like retrenchments. So, radical theory co-exists with, but is quite separate from, an economistic union practice.

Learning real lessons

Within this top-down approach, there is a temptation to measure success by the ability to remember the line, with little scope for debate or evaluation. This also undermines workers’ control: official policy and resolutions are taught as truth, rather than as positions reached by healthy debate, in the best traditions of workers’ democracy. If union congresses are workers’ parliaments, there must be scope for more than one political tradition, and for debate and renewal within traditions. As Mandy Moussouris and I have argued in a recent paper, workers’ education and workers’ control are indissolubly linked.

The official line can be wrong. When there is no tradition of critical evaluation, the outcome can be disastrous for the union base: political disorientation when the line fails, or unthinking dogmatism, sloganeering and emotive politics, and personal loyalties that ignore facts that do not fit. Abstract theory and daily stagnation replace a lively workers’ movement. For example, the failure of the Alliance is presented as due to betrayals, rather than to intrinsic problems in the model. Solutions then become fixing the Alliance, as if the Alliance was the only possible outcome – or even the best one, which is by no means obvious.

Radicalism plus heterodoxy

Third, workers’ education should expose people to radical ideas, while practising heterodoxy i.e. critical engagement with, and exposure to, a range of views and theories. That includes views people might not like. Participatory techniques that would “draw on many forces in civil society...while we differ with some of the theoretical, strategy and tactics of the Trotskyites and Anarcho-Syndicalists...it will be folly to ignore some of their valuable critique.” This has not come to pass: intolerance, even within the narrow NDR model, became the norm in COSATU and in its splinters.

Debate and difference are healthy, and there is nothing to be afraid of in discussing different views. What we should be afraid of is a culture of intolerance, vanguardism and manipulation. It presents itself as revolutionary when in fact it is a death sentence for a democratic, bottom-up, transformative unionism.

Breaking their haughty power

Fourth, workers’ education should be part of a transformative project. Any reasonable evaluation of the current situation indicates the need for profound change. It shows we operate in a world where a small ruling class dominates and exploits the popular classes through two pyramids: the structures of state and capital. Wealth and power are centralised. That is why natural endowments of wealth, like oil in Nigeria and gold in South Africa, or rapid economic growth, simply do not lead to better conditions for most people. This is true whatever the colour, nationality or gender of ruling elites.

It must be debated whether the state can actually be used by the popular classes. This claim can be tested against facts and experience. The claim that the state can or does represent the people is a fiction, easily dispelled by critical thinking. States operate by an iron logic of domination and resource extraction, and for a few.

Similarly, the argument that “capitalism can deliver” can be evaluated using theory and facts. Capitalism is revealed as a wasteful, inefficient, exploitative, crisis-ridden system; its innovations a profoundly distorted form of development, just as state government is a profoundly distorted form of administration.

Capitalism cannot be changed by entrepreneurship from below, or displaced by cooperatives, or transformed by petty trading, or a solidarity economy. This is because these initiatives exist on its margins, often as the desperate efforts to survive of hundreds of millions of poor people worldwide.

Counterpower, counterculture

This would suggest that the union movement needs to be the opposite of capital and the state:

- Bottom-up rather than top-down;
- Inclusive and democratic, rather than exclusive and exploitative;
Solidaristic and inclusive rather than intolerant;

Uniting workers in unions, uniting unions with each other, including across borders, as well as unions with other popular class sectors, like tenants in poor neighbourhoods, peasants, petty traders, unemployed etc.

Such a movement can develop the power to resist the existing system, and create a new society that is very different.

It can build a counter power to the existing system, with mass organisation that can take direct power by capturing and collectivising major means of administration, coercion and production. That can take over, and govern society through participatory democracy, including self-management at work, and participatory planning, including of production. It means preparing the popular classes for power through mass organisation, not handing it over (again) to parties, politicians, guerrillas, demagogues, dictators, or imperialists.

Technical and vocational skills
Union education should also try to develop technical skills, including accounting, planning, writing etc. We need to carefully study and map the industries and sectors where we organise. This is key to the whole project of taking over through a revolutionary, or social, general strike.

Every effort must also be made to maximise popular access to vocational training. Some dismiss this as not radical enough. However, slogans will not substitute for practical know-how; a lack of skills inevitably means bringing back top-down management. Others favour vocational training to upgrade workers for better jobs. But if vocational education is not embedded in the larger transformative project, it boils down to career advancement for a few. There is nothing wrong with such advancement, but most people will not access better jobs, and accessing better jobs does not emancipate society.

The sites of education
Finally, the sites of workers’ education matter. Institutionally, we need to build up specialised, well-resourced education structures, guided by congress decisions rather than direct control by a few leaders or funders. We need to rebuild equitable partnerships with labour service organisations.

Geographically, experience shows the value of building a large network of neighbourhood-based, or neighbourhood-adjacent centres. These can double as meeting places, and allow the education to include those not directly within union structures, such as housewives, unemployed and youths. This expands the reach of the project of building a radical counterculture. It creates a space for joint mobilisation and for unions to play a direct role in community politics and organising (e.g. among tenants or in social defence) and to transfer union skills and democratic structures into communities. This extension of counter power is an important matter. Institutionally, we need to build up specialised, well-resourced education structures, guided by congress decisions rather than direct control by a few leaders or funders. We need to rebuild equitable partnerships with labour service organisations.

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For example, the failure of the Alliance is presented as due to betrayals, rather than to intrinsic problems in the model. Solutions then become fixing the Alliance, or creating a new party in place of SACP.

Lucien van der Walt has long been involved in union and working-class education and movements. Currently at Rhodes University, he’s part of the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit and the Wits History Workshop.
Eskom Transformed: a truly public energy utility for a low carbon future

By Amandla correspondent

The new decade has brought with it the convergence of three pivotal issues in South African politics: the future of the state and public sector, the clear need for economic restructuring, and the increasingly obvious climate crisis. These issues are not new, but they are like most of the country’s worst problems and contradictions – they have been continually deferred by the patronage politics and “governance-as-usual” sleepwalking which have defined the nation’s shambles through the past two decades. However, there is a looming economic collapse, a resulting hunger crisis, and record-breaking droughts. With these, together with the state’s newly explicit commitment to austerity, real politics – the genuine struggle over how the future history of the nation will be written – will now resume in force.

One of the first defining political problems of this new decade is the question of Eskom’s future. Guided by the policy prescriptions of “pro-market” institutions, the state has devised a multi-stage solution to Eskom’s crises:

• First, a process of “unbundling” the utility into three separate entities: generation, transmission, and distribution, each expected to function independently and turn a profit.
• Then, an intensification of the existing contract–based programme to buy electricity from privately owned power producers.
• Finally, a future where privately–owned power producers compete in an energy market in order to sell their power to a state–owned transmission entity. This entity acts as a market middleman, selling this purchased power on to consumers.

The current government’s general attitude towards our three pivotal issues is clearly reflected in this vision of Eskom’s future. With climate change, they hope that market forces will align with the goals of reducing our carbon footprint. So in Eskom’s case the hope is that investment will stream into renewable energy rather than coal because it is the most profitable. As for economic restructuring, they hope that more private investment and market-friendly policymaking will help the economy get on its feet. So it is with Eskom; they hope that marketisation can ensure a stable power supply while attracting more capital, both domestic and foreign. Finally, they see the state’s role in all of this as that of economic mediator and occasional regulator; it is there only to ensure that the private sector runs things smoothly, and to intervene in the case of a severe market distortion or crisis.

Unions and progressive movements are right to be sceptical of the state’s intensification of a market–led development pathway, one which has historically failed to achieve equitable and sustainable growth. But they face an uphill fight. Not only does the political balance of forces lie with the state, but the state also possesses the high ground in terms of mainstream credibility. The arguments and assumptions underlying their vision for Eskom have remained largely unchallenged. They have managed to paint the left as irrational and reactionary in their opposition to unbundling and the marketisation of the energy sector.

In order to challenge this, three research organisations, AIDC (Alternative Information & Development Centre), TUED (Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, New York), and TNI (Transnational Institute, Amsterdam) came together. They have worked closely with trade unions organising workers at Eskom – National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (NUMSA) in producing a research report titled Eskom Transformed: Achieving a Just Energy Transition for South Africa.

The Eskom Transformed report provides a critical analysis of Eskom’s crisis which runs counter to that put forward by the state. At the same time, it also develops proposals for resolving the Eskom crisis in ways consistent with a collective commitment to energy democracy, equitable development paths, and combating the deepening ecological crisis.

What happens if Eskom unbundles?
The first key finding of the report is on the future of an unbundled Eskom if the current roadmap is to be followed. Assume that the roadmap has been realised. Eskom has been unbundled, Transmission has become an independent buyer and seller of power, independent power producers (IPPs) have come on board in numbers, and for-profit wind or solar farms are beginning to pop up around the country.

What happens next?
To begin with, increasing the share of energy produced by renewables would require an overhaul of the transmission and distribution systems to deal with the...
problem of variable generation. South Africa’s geography and climate are well suited to renewable energy generation. But even here the sun does not always shine on all solar panels, and there is not always enough wind to generate electricity from particular wind turbines.

Accommodating this variable power will require a drastically upgraded grid allowing for closer coordination across distribution and generation facilities, as well as the national construction of large and expensive storage facilities. The costs of incorporating renewable energy generation into the grid, especially in large quantities, are therefore substantial. They will inevitably fall on the shoulders of the unbundled “Eskom Transmission”.

Eskom Transmission could recoup these costs in two ways. They could pass the costs on to the IPPs through fees or a lowering of the price paid for their energy. Even if this proposal could get any political traction, it would scare off investors enough to endanger the nascent renewable energy market. However the second option is the most likely - react according to market logic, pass the cost on to distribution and, in the end, to the consumer, by raising tariffs.

Passing the system costs of renewables through to the end user in this way will have profoundly negative effects on the economy. It will also disproportionately impact those most vulnerable and precarious in our society. And it will further reduce the demand for electricity.

Further, if Eskom Transmission were to be unbundled and turned into an independent buyer and seller of power, then eventually the unbundled “Eskom Generation” would have to compete on a level playing field with IPPs in selling its power to Transmission. While still supplying the bulk of capacity, Eskom’s ageing and debt-ridden coal fleet would then be put in competition with renewable IPPs.

The prospects of survival look slim for an unbundled “Eskom Generation” stuck in a competitive energy war with IPPs. Unbundling will surely result in Generation inheriting the worst of Eskom’s balance sheet, given that Medupi and Kusile have attracted the bulk of its debt. Generation will face the dilemma of trying to keep its prices low enough to remain competitive, while still trying to turn a profit to deal with its debt, maintenance, and expansion costs.

At the same time, Eskom Generation will still be needed in order to generate the bulk of the nation’s power for the near future, given the enormous difficulty of transitioning away from our current reliance on coal. Capacity payments (paid for through the already strained state budget) would thus be required to prop up the economically failed generation entity. In all likelihood, Eskom Generation will become what is known in the energy world as a “zombie” utility - a utility that is not financially viable but is too important to fail. It is therefore kept in a constant state of semi-death by state bailouts and capacity payments.

Eskom as corporation

The second key argument of the report is on the impact that corporatisation has had on Eskom. This is a process that started in 1987, culminating in the Eskom Conversion Act of 2001. Corporatisation was a process that changed the structure and operating principles of Eskom. It shifted it from being a world class public utility focused on meeting a public need, to essentially a private company, required to make a profit and pay dividends and taxes.

Structured as a private company with the state as the sole shareholder, Eskom became a prime site for corruption and mismanagement. Rather than approaching electricity as an essential need requiring subsidisation, the “full cost recovery” model was adopted by the profit-seeking, corporatised Eskom. So it has continued to pass the burden of financial mismanagement and corruption onto consumers, as evidenced by a 400% tariff increase over 10 years.

The reliance on market competition and profit seeking as the backbone of service delivery pricing is a paradigm in Eskom’s case the government’s hope is that investment will stream into renewable energy rather than coal because it is the most profitable.
that continues to this day with Eskom’s corporate structure. It comes at the expense of equitable access, environmental protection, and labour rights. A service delivery ethos, premised on the principles of the market, is driven not by the assurance of the provision of a necessity; it is driven by the profit motive and provision to those who can pay.

Relying on private investment won’t work

The third critical thrust of the Eskom Transformed report is to dismantle the notion that private investment in South Africa’s energy sector is capable of bringing about the scale of investment in renewable energy needed to address the climate crisis.

The belief that the market will deliver an energy transition comes from two main assumptions. Firstly, it assumes that renewable energy has become the lowest-cost option for power generation. Secondly it assumes that investor interest in renewable energy will remain sufficient to attract large scale and long-term investment, to the point of displacing our current coal-based power generation.

Concretely speaking, this is expected to come about through an expansion of the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REI4P). Here, independent power producers compete for power purchase agreements (PPAs). In the agreements, the state agrees to buy power from them at a set price for a set number of years, virtually guaranteeing continued profit.

However, international experience of these auction-based systems shows that PPAs invariably have to be artificially inflated in order to keep attracting investment. A PPA virtually guarantees stable profits for project developers and investors alike. So, the competitive pressures to win these contracts have increased substantially. This has driven their costs down at a much faster rate than the fall in the cost of producing renewable energy. As a result of falling bid prices, investors see falling profit margins. This leads to a corresponding decrease in the rate of investment. To simplify matters, this can be referred to as the “three fall effect”: falling contract prices lead to falling profits which lead to falling levels of investment.

In response, states (or transmission utilities) have had to raise the contract price to above-market levels in order to attract sufficient investment. This has not yet unfolded in South Africa. But all signs point to the low contract prices of our last bid window being too low to attract long term, continual investment. The odds of such a market-based system attracting planned process of energy transition and widespread electrification. Such a process is impossible under the requirement to generate profit.

Of course, the challenges of building a transformed Eskom are immense, especially in the face of systemic mismanagement within the utility. However, the current crises were caused by political decisions and they can be undone with political will. The transformed Eskom that we propose will require restructuring around a series of principles that make it a truly publicly owned and controlled utility. This requires much deeper levels of public and worker participation and oversight.

There are examples for us to follow. In Paris, the water utility was municipalised with various civilian bodies all providing oversight. In Chinese state-owned enterprises, there are elected employee congresses with decision-making power on a variety of social issues, including welfare and housing, wages and bonuses. They also have a say in the nomination of senior managers – a safeguard against outside “cadre deployment”. It is through such processes and bodies that the transparency and accountability required of a transformed Eskom can be developed and ensured.

The struggle over Eskom’s future will prove to be a defining introduction to this new decade because it is both a crisis that cannot be ignored, and one that requires firm answers to each of these three core issues. In taking action on Eskom, the state will commit to an explicit vision of what role they think the public sector should play going forward, of what kind of economy they want, and of whether they will take the climate crisis seriously. We hope that the Eskom Transformed report will prove to be a valuable tool in the hands of unions and progressive movements who are instead striving towards a different vision of the future. It is a vision of a progressive and transformed public sector, leading the nation on an equitable low-carbon development path, away from the quagmire we find ourselves in today.
What do we mean by Balance of Payments? IMF loan taken under false “balance of payment crisis” pretences

On 27 July, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a loan to the South African government. The government is taking out this loan in bad faith. Behind its cover, their intention is to use it, politically, to justify further “fiscal consolidation” - austerity. (Cartoon from Daily News Egypt)

The IMF press statement on the approval of the loan says that it was approved to: “help fill the urgent Balance of Payments (BOP) needs originating from the fiscal pressures posed by the pandemic. It will complement the authorities’ strong policy response to the crisis and their planned post-Covid-19 fiscal consolidation and reforms to promote growth that benefits all South Africans... South Africa’s urgent BOP needs justifies the RFI purchase. By adding pressures to the capital account, Covid-19 has exacerbated the BOP difficulties.”

This statement by the IMF makes it clear that the loan was taken under the pretext that it would help to alleviate South Africa’s Balance of Payments (BOP) “difficulties”. The question therefore should be: does the IMF help alleviate South Africa’s BOP difficulties? And does the loan from the IMF help the balance of payments in the medium to long-term?

What is the balance of payments?

The balance of payments is an account of how much money (measured in foreign currency) enters and leaves the country each year in the form of financial transactions and trade with the rest of the world. In other words, the BoP records the net result of foreign currency coming into and going out of South Africa.

The BoP account consists of two primary accounts - the current account and the capital account (also called the financial account).

• The current account records the trade balance (exports less imports). It also includes the balance of “investment incomes”: interest and dividends received by domestic investors minus interest and dividends paid out to investors outside South Africa.

• The financial or capital account records money coming in as capital investment minus money paid out to service debt which must be paid in foreign exchange (dollars, pounds etc).

• The trade balance comes from four sources: The massive fall in oil prices
  • A reduction in imports (by 32%) because of lower domestic demand
  • A weaker Rand which increases the rand value of exports.
  • The increasing price of gold

This improvement is slightly reduced by a 17% drop in expected exports compared to 2019. The reduced level of payments in interests and dividends to non-resident investors comes from non-resident investors selling off SA assets (particularly government bonds) in the first quarter of this year. As a result, foreign ownership of SA bonds declined substantially, thereby reducing the payment of interest and dividends from the current account.

However, South Africa has had growing pressure on the current account (more going out than coming in) since the early 2000s. This has usually got nothing to do with the trade balance. It is mainly because of the massive outflows of dollars and other foreign currency in the form of dividends, interest payments and profits to non-resident bondholders and shareholders. The post-apartheid government made this situation worse when it phased out and liberalised exchange controls, which allowed money to move freely out of the country, as early as 1995. This process also enabled big corporations to move their main listing (where their shares are traded) overseas. These massive outflows mean that
more money is leaving the current account than coming in. As a result, in order to avoid running out of foreign currency, South Africa had to attract larger amounts to come in as investment into the capital account. This is done by keeping interest rates high. That attracts non-residents to lend money to the government, parastatals and corporations. They borrow money by selling bonds.

But this becomes a vicious cycle – more money coming in as investment means more money going out as profits, dividends and interest payments. Then, even higher interest rates are required to attract more foreign investment, which again leads to more money going out as profits. And so it goes on.

But is SA currently experiencing a BoP crisis?

The Balance of Payments is healthy if enough money is coming in to cover import costs and service debt in foreign currency in the short term. It is unhealthy if it doesn’t.

The SA Reserve Bank (SARB) has to have sufficient stocks (reserves) of foreign currency to pay when the Balance of Payments is negative (more going out than coming in). It has set the level to have enough reserves to pay for three months of imports plus the equivalent amount of short-term, foreign debt service costs. According to the IMF, SA’s expected imports for the whole of 2020 are $80 billion. In August, South Africa’s foreign exchange reserves were at more than $55 billion. That means we could cover import costs for approximately 8 months, more than double the level required by the SARB.

What about our ability to service short-term debt costs in foreign currency?

SA’s total state debt service cost in the 2020/2021 budget was R229.1bn. A very small percentage (10%) of this is required to be paid back in dollars, euros or other foreign currencies. So, according to SARB’s own requirements, SA is far from having a foreign currency, or BoP, crisis.

Will the loan from the IMF not help, especially since it’s low-interest?

Given the vicious cycle of SA’s dependency on foreign investment, the loan from the IMF will make the problems of the balance of payments worse. It certainly won’t make them better. More debt in dollars creates greater dependence on capital investment and exports to raise the foreign currency needed to service that debt. The IMF loan, and the negotiations with the World Bank in August, signal that the government will not break from the country’s export-orientated economy and dependence on financial inflows.

South Africa’s total external debt (corporations, the government, parastatals, everybody) stood at about $155 billion in March this year. And in fact that was down just under $31 billion since December. Between January and March, foreigners sold off bonds to domestic investors. Then they changed their rands to dollars. This “flight to safety” contributed to $6 billion more flowing out through the capital account than coming in.

But many factors influence the total balance of payments, and the overall balance of payments in the first quarter (current and capital accounts) was the opposite of a “BoP crisis”.

Earlier this year, Treasury’s chief director for international finance, Roy Havemann, confirmed this when he said: “We were quite concerned about funding short-term pressures on the current account and break the dependence on short term financial inflows. This would ensure greater macroeconomic independence, meaning that we could reduce interest rates even below what they have been since the outbreak of the pandemic.

More problems with the loan

Supporters say the loan comes with no conditionalities. But this fails to take into account that it locks us into dependency on the global finance industry and institutions and gives Treasury greater backing to push through further austerity. The working poor are the ones who will carry the cost.

All this goes to show that the IMF loan was taken under false pretences, and that real alternatives exist. Without massive struggles and resistance from below, these falsehoods will remain virtually unchallenged.

But what alternatives are there to the IMF?

Firstly, we can identify and repudiate illegitimate debt. Why did SA’s foreign debt jump so dramatically under the Zuma regime? The debt-to-GDP ratio in the government budget increased from about 28% to above 63% before the lockdown. It’s headed in the direction of over 80%. Is this legitimate debt? With the state capture of Eskom, Transnet, Prasa, etc, there is good reason to suspect that many debts are also illegitimate. A public and forensic audit of the debt is essential, with an intent to cancel the repayment of all illegitimate debts.

Additionally, more stringent capital and exchange controls would reduce the pressures on the current account and break the dependence on capital inflows. This would ensure greater macroeconomic independence, meaning that we could reduce interest rates even below what they have been even since the outbreak of the pandemic.
When Chinese eat grass: the economic crisis amid the coronavirus pandemic

By Au Loong-Yu

LAST YEAR, DURING THE HEIGHT of the trade war with the US, it was reported that a top Chinese official vowed that China would continue to defy US’s bullying, even if this required Chinese people to eat grass instead of rice for a year. The trade war dealt a blow to exports, one of the three main growth engines (the other two being aggregate investment and household consumption).

Early 2020 witnessed a second blow to China’s exports – the coronavirus pandemic.

Signs of economic contraction

Although China’s export dependency has been steadily declining for the last decade, one quarter of active labour in the country (200 million workers) still depend on the export sector for jobs. The three most important coastal cities are Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou. They are all heavily dependent on foreign investment, which accounts for between 60 and 70 percent of the cities’ GDP. No wonder we saw a contraction of the national GDP by 6.8 percent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2020.

For the first time in 30 years, China has abandoned an annual GDP target for 2020.

Official data on unemployment stands at 5.9 percent, but no one believes it. One of the major flaws of official figures is that they only count those who possess urban household registration. So they exclude rural migrant workers. A Diplomat report put the real figure at 12 percent, and this figure is widely agreed. One report has put it as high as 20 percent, or 70 million unemployed. In China, the party continues to massage figures to make its performance look good.

2020 may also be the year when public revenue growth becomes negative for the first time in thirty years. This may further put pension funds at risk as they have been running out of money despite public subsidies. The recession in the real estate market, which has been one of the main pillars of growth, is also bad news; municipal governments now find themselves unable to sell as much land at a favourable price to developers as before and have seen a drop in their revenue as well.

This will also affect their ability to pay back loans – municipal governments are heavily indebted. Since the 2008 financial crisis, local governments have set up Local Government Financing Vehicles (LGFVs) to borrow money to invest in infrastructure so as to boost demand (they also allow officials to steal public money from state projects). Much of the debt is hidden, but it

Promoting domestic consumption

With the deterioration in China’s relationship with the US, Beijing’s most recent response to its sharp decline in exports is to promote the “domestic circulation system” – boost domestic demand. This demand has two sources – investment and household consumption. Raising investment is not the answer as China has already suffered from over-investment. The abnormally high investment rate of more than 40 percent of GDP is the result of a long-term industrialisation strategy promoted by the state. But it has depressed workers’ wages and peasants’ income, and so it has also depressed household consumption. While household consumption of 60–70 percent of GDP is considered normal internationally, in China it has always been low, on average as low as 50 percent between 1952 and 2019. What is more alarming is its continuous fall, from 47.7 percent in 2000 to 34.6 percent in 2010; since then it has risen again but only very slightly, to 38.8 percent in 2019.

To correct this would require a redistribution of wealth, with a significant rise in the income share of working people, to enable them to buy what is domestically produced. The regime has long realised the danger of such a structural problem, and has, for over a decade, repeatedly called for reform to raise the wage share of GDP. However, they have failed to do this because increasing the income of the poor is against their own interest. They prefer to solve the problem by exporting surplus capital, for instance by exporting surplus capital, for instance the Belt and Road Initiative. Yet with the onset of a global contest with the US, this outlet for China’s problem also seems to be much less promising.
State vs private capital

Beijing is now encountering its biggest challenge since its crackdown on the democratic movement in 1989. It is now beginning to turn against its former ally, the private business class. Economically speaking, the private business class, even if not as strong as state capitalism, is still strong. Today, China’s private sector accounts for more than half of GDP, although it is the state which monopolises the commanding heights of the economy.

Yet politically the private capitalists are entirely impotent, and they have been the target of state coercion since the economic downturn. On the pretext of fighting corruption, in recent years Xi Jinping jailed a lot of tycoons, amongst them HNA Group’s Wang Jian, Anbang Insurance Group’s Wu Xiaohui, and movie star Fan Bingbing.

Since late 2018, the state has started promoting the idea that China has to further strengthen the state sector at the expense of the private sector. Since then, 41 listed private companies have sold some of their shares to the state, and it is the state which now practically controls them. Around the same time, the head of Alibaba, Jack Ma, announced that he would retire from the giant he founded in 2019, although he was only 54. It is widely believed that he had to step down to allow the party to have control over his company.

The working people had to break their backs in order to satisfy both their bosses and the party bosses, but they could still find jobs. The coming of a new stage of slower growth has made it increasingly difficult to simultaneously satisfy the greed of private businesses and party bosses, not to mention the needs of the poor. Hence the tension between the state capitalists and the private capitalists. This has also prompted the latter to pursue capital flight.

The poor suffer

The bottom layer of Chinese society is now in an increasingly dire situation. There is much less industrial action this year than last year. The pandemic and the economic downturn have prompted many rural migrant workers to stay in their home villages. Those who are lucky enough to have a job in the cities have become more conforming.

In May, a remark made by Premier Li Keqiang not only put a spotlight again on the millions of working poor. It also might suggest disagreement at the top. He said that China has 600 million people with a monthly income of 1,000 RMB. This is more than 40% of the Chinese population. As one reporter remarked, this amount of money would not be enough just for an employee’s monthly lunch expenses in big cities.

Li Keqiang said this in the midst of a huge effort from Xi Jinping to eradicate absolute poverty in China by the end of this year, promoting China to the level of “xiaokang”, or a “moderately prosperous society”. Li’s remark is a slap in the face for Xi.

What annoyed Xi further was Li pushing local governments to support street vendors as a way to provide jobs for the jobless. This is considered to be discrediting Xi’s “xiaokang” society. Soon the media was filled with attacks on the economy of “street vendors”. This event has exposed differences at the top level in the midst of an economic downturn. Even if Li is more realistic in his policy, it would be the bureaucracy who implement it. The problem is that this bureaucracy is never neutral; it constitutes the core of the exploiting class.

In the economic downturn, a lot of Chinese are now feeding on “grass”, but the burden is definitely not evenly distributed. It is, again, the working poor who suffer. The party bosses continue to enjoy their more than “moderately prosperous” lifestyle.

Au Loong-Yu is a long-time activist based in Hong Kong, a member of the editorial board of China Labor Net and author of China Rise: Strength and Fragility, and his new book Hong Kong in revolt: the protest movement and the future of China.
The One State Reality: what is to be done?

By William Shoki

Israel has suspended its plans to annex large swathes of Palestinian territory (in exchange for diplomatic ties with the United Arab Emirates). But the existence in the first place of such a scheme, in flagrant violation of international law, is enough to confirm that the prospects for Palestinian statehood remain dim. Israel’s expansionist impulses continue unchecked. What changes is only the pace.

As things stand, the West Bank is a jumbled patchwork of Israeli settlements weaving through Palestinian towns. There are more than 625,000 settlers in the West Bank who have institutionalised their stay by building thriving businesses, schools, hospitals and universities; it’s hard to imagine that this firmly entrenched community can simply be uprooted without opposition. In the Gaza Strip, Israel’s illegal land, air, and sea blockade persists in its thirteenth year. Between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea then, 13 million people’s lives are wholly dictated by Israel – where they can move around, which goods and services they can access, which currency they use, and what work they can do to earn it.

The creation of two states has been the generally accepted position for a lasting solution to the situation. But it is one that fails to account for the fact that the situation has become a one-state reality. In truth, this was always the ambition from the start. The fundamental character of the modern, political Zionist movement, which underpinned the creation of Israel, has consistently been about, as Joseph Massad notes: “building a demographically exclusive Jewish state modeled after Christian Europe.” He likens this “religio-racial” idea of supremacy over the Palestinian Arabs to “European colonialism with its ideology of white supremacy over the natives”.

As the protest slogan goes, Zionism is racism, but more precisely it is ethn-nationalism. Palestinian statehood in the occupied territories would existentially threaten the claim that the Jewish people have a trans-historical right to that land. Therefore, the idea of Palestinian statehood will forever be entertained, but never allowed.

Writing in 1999, Edward Said puts the heart of the protracted matter well. He describes it as a “contest over the same land by two peoples who always believed they had valid title to it and who hoped the other side would in time give up or go away.” The Palestinians who were there first, also gave up first, and it is from this defeat that the idea of two states as an historical compromise was born. But now, with the disappearance of any viable grounds for a Palestinian state, the hope of the Zionists today is that the Palestinians will finally go away.

That is why it is worth paying attention to long-time Zionists and advocates of the two-state solution when they begin to shift tack. The American columnist and commentator Peter Beinart recently did this in Jewish Currents. He made the case that progressive Jews should abandon the two-state model and rather push for Arab-Jewish equality within a single state. In The New York Times soon after, Beinart writes that: “The goal of equality is now more realistic than the goal of separation. The reason is that changing the status quo requires a vision powerful enough to create a mass movement. A fragmented Palestinian state under Israeli control does not offer that vision. Equality can. Increasingly, one equal state is not only the preference of young Palestinians. It is the preference of young Americans too.”

One-state solutionism

The one-state solution is not a new idea. Its most progressive proponents envision a secular, constitutional democracy, built on a bill of rights, guaranteeing universal adult suffrage, non-sectarianism, and the achievement of equality and dignity for all – effectively, the South African model. Others envision a confederation-like country such as Belgium, where the distinct national identities of Jews and Arabs are preserved. Whatever supporters for a one-state solution propose, they run against arguably the biggest problem that has overshadowed it for years – the lack of a political subject to champion it in struggle.

The one-state solution largely has its support base in circles of intellectuals, activists and religious figures, usually outside the Occupied Territories themselves. There is no movement on the ground that pushes the formation of a unified state as its leading demand. Indeed, the growing calls for a binational state rest on a theory of change that the idea would become sufficiently widespread to galvanise lumpen Palestinians into action.

In the past, I have also argued in support of the one-state solution. The instance was the South African example of the re-emergence of the Freedom Charter’s unitary vision through the ascendency of the United Democratic Front. In this context I wrote that: “This renewed internal struggle revitalised the international struggle which eventually culminated in widespread boycotts, divestments and sanctions. In the view of many, this was the tipping point that toppled Apartheid.”

Yet, the one-state position is actually the other way round. It carries with it the view that a revitalised international struggle will renew the internal struggle. It contains the same error as the two-state solution; it is invariably a form of solutionism – recommendations from above about what should happen next.
These days, little is done to analyse the actually existing balance of forces on the ground. The standard view is to accept that Hamas and Fatah are no longer organic representatives of the interests of Palestinians. This is coupled with the vague assertion that there is some promising support, especially among the young, for the option of a binational state. Given the nature and scale of the material forces invested in the persistence of the status quo, however, what matters is less what democratic outcome is preferred but how the power can be built to realise it.

Class struggle in Israel

At the moment, Israel itself is at a critical juncture. Scores of people have taken to the streets for weekly demonstrations, disgruntled with the right-wing government. Its leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, is embroiled in corruption scandals and has failed to cushion the economic impact of Covid-19. By May, more than one million Israelis had lost their jobs and the unemployment rate had climbed to 27%. They have only now begun to experience a small part of what the Palestinians have known for years – widespread job losses and deteriorating living standards.

Class struggle is beginning to break through the surface of Israeli politics. The Israeli working-class has throughout history been analysed as a settler-colonial working class, collaborating with the Israeli ruling class for privileges funded through military occupation. But today’s capitalist crisis was precipitated by the 2008 financial meltdown and escalated to an unprecedented degree by Covid-19. In such a context, concessions cannot easily be given to the working-class, especially when the growth model of the economy is being fundamentally called into question.

This period of ferment presents an opportunity for renewed working-class organisation within both Israel and Palestine, articulating the common interests of both Israeli and Palestinian workers. This confronts the founding myth of Zionism which is that the interests of the Israeli ruling class and the Israeli working class are aligned. The workers’ struggle is particularly important for the phase of history we are entering when many believe that the worker is becoming obsolete.

During the period of high globalisation, capital hid behind the curtain of “there is no alternative,” but it is unable to keep in the political background any longer. Today, the extent of social collapse all over means that we have no choice but to find an alternative. The workers’ struggle must be central to realising such an alternative, even on questions that seemingly implicate the nation before they implicate class. Ultimately, the fight of the Palestinian people is for their self-determination, not as a people but as people. And socialists have always believed that when people start exercising real control over the working part of their lives, they begin to seriously demand that they should exercise control over their lives as a whole. Writing about the rise of black trade unionism in 1970s South Africa, Steven Friedman observed that while they might not have been “laboratories for revolution,” they were at least “laboratories for democracy.”

It was the labour movement,
The tremendous blast that shook Lebanon on 4 August will be recorded as a major turning point in the country’s history, no less so than the much less powerful explosion that killed former prime minister Rafik Hariri on 14 February 2005. It took 15 years before a UN-appointed tribunal basically admitted its impotence on the latter event. So there won’t be any official certainty about the circumstances of the terrible explosion at Beirut’s port in the foreseeable future. A few conclusions can, however, be drawn about this highly traumatic tragedy.

Ruling class as a whole responsible
The first is that, notwithstanding the blast’s particular circumstances, the responsibility for leaving 2,750 tonnes of highly explosive ammonium nitrate warehoused in the heart of Beirut for no less than six years falls on the whole Lebanese ruling class – all those who have been in the Lebanese government during that period. Presidents, prime ministers, ministers of transport, chiefs of key security apparatuses and port administrators are all equally to blame. The list includes leaders of both the official Lebanese state and the parallel state constituted by Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is known to closely monitor Beirut’s port and use them at its will.

How did Lebanon get to this point?
We need to take in 30 years of political and economic misrule to understand. Before 1975, when the civil war started, Lebanon was known to be a “fiscal paradise”: a country of wild capitalism. Its bank secrecy and sham taxation made it an ideal territory for money laundering, capital flight and all sorts of trafficking. The war ended with a political and constitutional agreement between Lebanese factions achieved in 1989 under the joint auspices of the Saudi monarchy and the Syrian regime. It was confirmed the year after by the latter’s participation in the US-led coalition that waged the first international war on Iraq from Saudi territory.

For a dozen years, Lebanon was run by this Saudi–Syrian entente: representing the Saudi side, Rafik Hariri closely coordinated with Ghazi Kanaan, the all-powerful head of Syria’s security apparatus in Lebanon. Damascus’s opposition to the second US-led war on Iraq and the occupation of that country in 2003 led to the end of the entente. Washington started exerting pressure to expel Syrian troops from Lebanon, notably by sponsoring UN security council resolution 1559 of 2004 (Russia and China abstained in order not to veto it).

Hariri’s assassination triggered a huge outpouring of popular anger, compelling Damascus to withdraw its troops. It kept pulling strings in Lebanon

By Gilbert Achcar

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nevertheless, through a triple alliance composed of its close ally Amal, the Shia sectarian movement led by Nabih Berri, the Lebanese parliament’s speaker for life (he assumed office in 1992); Hezbollah, the Lebanese agent of Iran, Syria’s regional ally; and Michel Aoun, Syria’s former bitter foe who about-turned in 2006.

Over the past 15 years, Lebanon has basically been run by a renewed joint government, involving Rafik Hariri’s son Saad and the triple alliance. It has continued a disastrous economic policy of neoliberal reconstruction that had been in place since the end of the war. However, the war that unfolded in Syria since the 2011 Arab spring has considerably weakened Damascus and increased the role of Tehran and its Lebanese representative, as Iran gained the upper hand over Syria itself. This shift in the regional balance of forces translated into the election of Aoun as president in 2016. The botched attempt by the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to twist Saad Hariri’s arm into ending collaboration with Tehran’s forces translated into the election of Aoun as president in 2016. The botched attempt by the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to twist Saad Hariri’s arm into ending collaboration with Tehran’s followers in 2017 was a clumsy reaction to this turn of events.

“All of them means all of them”

In any event, the responsibility for the Lebanese economy’s collapse falls squarely on the whole spectrum of the country’s ruling class. That means all those who held office over the past 30 years, as much as it falls on the banking sector with which they have all been enmeshed. Riad Salamé, the governor of Lebanon’s Central Bank since 1992 and still in place, embodies these entrenched problems. This shared responsibility was addressed by the now famous central slogan of the popular uprising that began on 17 October last year: “All of them means all of them.”

With popular anger reaching a climax because of Beirut’s recent blast, there has been much hope in Lebanon for a silver lining to the tragedy in imposing two key demands of the October uprising on the ruling class: a government truly independent from it and new elections on the basis of a new electoral law. The expectation was that international pressure would force the implementation of these demands and provide a counterweight to the local ruling class.

Emmanuel Macron’s visit to Beirut two days after the blast brought this expectation to a peak. Here was a leader who dared to mingle with the people right after the disaster, many thought, overlooking that it was a great photo-op for a French president beleaguered in his own country. The expectation did not last: Macron’s consistent line regarding Lebanon is that Macron has systematically acted to maintain Hariri–Hezbollah coalition rule in the country. This is why he intervened decisively to bring back from Riyadh a sequestered Saad Hariri in 2017. It is why he has now dispelled the Lebanese people’s hope for an independent government and new elections by reportedly favouring a “unity government”. This has been interpreted as a plan to “[reinstall] the Sunni former prime minister, Saad Hariri, in return for concessions from Hezbollah”. Instead of a big bang, this would mean Macron is actively working to turn Beirut’s blast into a backward-propelling force – surely a recipe for increased discontent and further turmoil.

Gilbert Achcar is professor of development studies and international relations at SOAS, University of London.
Until Black women are free, none of us will be free

Barbara Smith and the Black feminist visionaries of the Combahee River Collective

By Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

This is an edited version of an article, which first appeared in the New Yorker.

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE STATEMENT at College. The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was a small organization, but it involved some of the luminaries of Black feminism: Barbara Smith and her twin sister, Beverly Smith, as well as Demita Frazier, Cheryl Clarke, Akasha Hull, Margo Okazawa–Rey, Chirlane McCray, and Audre Lorde. They were dismayed by the direction of the feminist movement, which they believed to be dominated by middle-class white women, and the suffocating masculinity in Black–nationalist organizations. So they set out to formulate their own politics and strategies in response to their distinct experiences as Black women.

The Black women of the CRC were not the first to break with white feminist and Black–nationalist organizations. What distinguished the CRC from others was the explanatory power of their statement. Reading the statement, two things struck me. The first was its effort to combine socialist politics with feminism. Where I was active, feminism was always painted as hostile to socialism. As it was explained to me, feminists saw the world as divided between classes that fought hard enough, my mother, who had studied English, French, and Spanish in college, was finishing her doctorate and raising me and my brother. My father left when I was two. My mother’s life of work, her compulsory caretaking and debt. It made sense of her physical exhaustion; the chronic exhaustion she felt from work was masking the symptoms of an untreated and ultimately deadly case of lupus. Doris Jeanne Taylor’s life was unceremoniously extinguished two weeks to the day she entered the hospital.

But my mother’s experiences were altogether different. While my father believed that a revolution was within the grasp of those who fought hard enough, I had seen the everyday variety of racism in the US that left most Black people with a bitter edge. When I was seven, I saw my father jump in to stop a group of white teenagers from threatening my older brother, only to have the police blame him for the altercation.

The Combahee Statement obliterated that premise. Theoretically rich and strategically nimble, it imagined a course of politics that could take Black women from the margins of society to the center of a revolution. Because Black women were among the most marginalized people in this country, their political struggles brought them into direct conflict with the intertwined malignancies of capitalism—racism, sexism, and poverty. As the CRC statement explained: “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

My other revelation came out of their insistence that “Black feminism” was necessary to clearly articulate the experiences of Black women. It had never occurred to me that the framework of “race” was not nearly extensive enough to capture the particular ways that Black women experienced American society. I had seen the everyday variety of racism in the US that left most Black people with a bitter edge. When I was seven, I saw my father jump in to stop a group of white teenagers from threatening my older brother, only to have the police blame him for the altercation.

But my mother’s experiences were altogether different. While my father believed that a revolution was within the grasp of those who fought hard enough, my mother, who had studied English, French, and Spanish in college, was finishing her doctorate and raising me and my brother. My father left when I was two. When, in the early eighties, my mother got burned out from haggling with less qualified white male administrators and a fancy career that was going nowhere fast, she started a house–cleaning business. She didn’t know about the Volcker Shock and the recession that would follow. My mother’s advanced degrees could not protect her from bankruptcy in 1982. They could not stop our lights from being periodically turned off, or a steady stream of bill collectors from coming to our front door. They could not help her relax, work less, or be more present. My mother died at fifty–two, fifteen years after she filed for bankruptcy; the chronic exhaustion she felt from work was masking the symptoms of an untreated and ultimately deadly case of lupus. Doris Jeanne Taylor’s life was unceremoniously extinguished two weeks to the day she entered the hospital.

It was not until long after her death that I saw the composite portrait of a single Black mother, raising two kids with a bankruptcy scuttling her credit, a perpetually faulty car draining her bank account, and a broad network of family members to care for. Racism alone could not explain what killed my mother. Gender was also an incomplete answer. It was the overlap of race, gender, and the aspirations to the comfort of a class that she poked around the edges of but could not ultimately break into. Black feminism made sense of my mother’s life of work, her compulsory caretaking and debt. It made sense of her senseless death, just shy of the twenty—first century. Malcolm X made it plain: “The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.”
A new view of feminism and socialism

All of this stood in stark contradiction to what, as a young person, I had understood “feminism” to be. I had seen feminism as the domain of white women primarily concerned with glass ceilings and access to abortion. The women of the CRC described how the myriad ways that Black women experienced oppression could translate into a radical rejection of the status quo. As they explained: “Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence.” And they were doing even more than that: the Combahee Statement was also written to describe how race, gender, and sexual orientation were woven together in the lives of queer Black women. In describing the distinct experiences of Black women who were lesbians, they pioneered what would eventually become known as “intersectionality” - the idea that multiple identities can be constantly and simultaneously present within one person’s body. The experiences of Black lesbians could not be reduced to gender, race, class, or sexuality. The CRC demanded politics that could account for all, and not just aspects of their identity.

Most important, the CRC saw themselves as socialists and as part of the broader left, but they understood that no mass movement for socialism could be organized without responding to the particular forms of oppression experienced by Black women, Chicana women, lesbians, single mothers, and so many other groups. Their point was a simple one: you cannot expect people to join your movement by telling them to put their particular issues on hold for the sake of some ill-defined “unity” at a later date. Solidarity was the bridge by which different groups of people could connect on the basis of mutual understanding, respect, and the old socialist edict that an injury to one was an injury to all. It was mind-blowing!

Identity politics

The class and race tensions within feminism lasted far beyond the seventies. Yet, the Combahee Statement celebrated the possibilities of a political coalition born out of solidarity among groups who recognized the need to be engaged in struggle. In this way, the CRC pioneered the notion of “identity politics,” perhaps one of the most controversial and misunderstood terms in all of US politics. In the statement, the authors described “the concept of identity politics” in the following way: “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.”

I recently spoke with Barbara Smith, who made clear that “identity politics” was not intended to be exclusionary or to contend that only those who suffered a particular oppression could fight against it or even comment on it. “We were not being reductive, we were not being separatists,” she said. “Combahee was never separatist.” This would, of course, have been a rejection of the solidarity at the heart of the CRC’s politics. Instead, they argued that Black women – and all oppressed people – had the right to form their own political agendas, because no one else would. Smith told me, “By ‘identity politics,’ we meant simply this: we have a right as Black women in the nineteen-seventies to formulate our own political agendas.” She went on, “We don’t have to leave out the fact that we are women, we do not have to leave out the fact that we are Black. We don’t have to do white feminism, we don’t have to do patriarchal Black nationalism – we don’t have to do those things. We can obviously create a politics that is absolutely aligned with our own experiences as Black women – in other words, with our identities. That’s what we meant by “identity politics”, that we have a right. And, trust me, very few people agreed that we did have that right in the nineteen-seventies. So we asserted it anyway.”

Any concept, once it is released into the world, can take on new meanings when confronted with new problems. Identity politics has become so untethered from its original usage that it has lost much of its original explanatory power. In its earliest iteration, Black feminism was assumed to be radical because the class position of Black women, overwhelmingly, was at the bottom of society. But the civil-rights revolution and concerted efforts by the political establishment created a different reality for a small number of African-Americans. Today, there is a small but influential Black political class – a Black elite and what could be described as the aspirational Black middle class – whose members continue to be constrained by racial discrimination and inequality but who hold the promise that a better life is possible in the United States. They stand in contrast to the Black poor and working class, who live in veritable police states, with low-wage work, poor health care, substandard and expensive housing, and an acute sense of insecurity.

Much of what is meant by identity politics in its contemporary idiom is simply representation – the presence of Black, queer, gendered, and klassified bodies with almost no attention paid to their political commitments. But the radicality of Black women’s politics was based on their position at the bottom. The view is decidedly different from the top. The CRC gave us the political tools to understand the difference between bottom-up and top-down politics, and their distorted manifestation in the identity politics of today.
After Ferguson

When I came back to the Combahee Statement, in the aftermath of the Ferguson uprising, I saw that its politics had the potential to make a way out of what felt like no way. But then I understood it differently, not just as a critical document in the canon of feminist literature or as a much-needed exposition of the origins of Black feminism. Instead, I read it as a powerful intervention for the left as a whole. In a political moment when futile arguments claimed to pit race against class, and identity politics against mass movements, the CRC showed how to understand the relationship between race, class, and gender through the actual experiences of Black women. As the statement read:

“We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.”

Black women were at the helm of the growing Black Lives Matter movement, and they, too, were gravitating to the politics of the CRC Smith told me: “Many of the people in the Movement for Black Lives absolutely acknowledge that they are inspired by the politics of the Combahee River Collective and by the feminism of women of color, not just Black women.”

She added, “One of the signs to me that feminist-of-color politics are influencing this moment is the multiracial, multiethnic diversity – and not just racial and ethnic, but every kind of diversity – of the people who are in the streets now. That’s right out of the Black feminist playbook.”

Liberation of all oppressed

In 2016, as the fortieth anniversary of the Combahee Statement approached, I realized that it would be an opportunity to draw attention back to the document and its astounding presciince and analysis, and to complicate a stilted and unsatisfying national discussion about who the real inheritors were of socialist politics in the United States. At that time, when I first thought of collecting an oral history of the Combahee River Collective, which became the book How We Get Free, Senator Bernie Sanders was in the thick of a contentious Democratic Presidential primary. A good portion of the tension was generated by wild and unfounded assertions that socialism and the spoils of social democracy were only of interest to white people. I kept coming back to the CRC’s basic claim:

“We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political–economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation.”

No one had the right to strip socialism and its rootedness in collectivity, democracy, and human fulfilment from Black women, or the Black radical tradition. The claims that socialism was for white people were an affront to a long lineage of Black communists and socialists here in the United States. Black Americans have always been drawn to radical and revolutionary politics as a salve for the diseased wound of racial oppression and the poverty and misery it creates. If lynchings, police brutality, and rat-infested housing were the best that American democracy could offer Black Americans, then how bad could communism or socialism really be?

Today, in the midst of the greatest wave of protest and social upheaval, many of us turn to history as a way to grasp some frame of reference. I myself have found the Combahee Statement more compelling than ever. The CRC connected the exploitative tendency of capitalism to a range of oppressions that kept apart those with the most interest in coming together. They envisioned coalition politics on the basis of mutual solidarity, including a commitment to the struggles against sexism, heterosexism, racism, class oppression, exploitation, and imperialism. These were, in their view, the preconditions for a mass movement in which no one’s issues were left behind.
What’s next?
Barbara Smith, many years after playing a pioneering role in the formation of the CRC, is sceptical about the longevity of the current upsurge centred around the black lives matter mobilisations. Will it turn into something more lasting than a frustrated outburst from those at the bottom? As Smith told me: “I’m not convinced that, despite the millions of people who are out in the streets expressing that they are done with things as they are - I’m not convinced that that translates into a movement. We now have language, we have an analysis of what’s going on with the prison-industrial complex, with mass incarceration, with police brutality, with extrajudicial murders - we have that, and we have bases of operation, because there are definitely Black Lives Matter organizations in various cities around the country.” She continued, “But the question for me is: What’s next? How do we mobilize all of this energy and actually bring about fundamental political, social, and economic change?”

Of course, what comes next will depend on what those who constitute the movement do. There are no maps or predetermined paths that guarantee the success or failure of a movement. It is a living thing. But we can take inspiration from the imaginative optimism of the Combahee Statement. Many things have changed since the publication of the document, but many have not, and therein lies the problem that continues to pull people into the streets. The women of the CRC believed that another world was possible, one in which Black women, and thus all of humanity, were freed from systems of oppression and exploitation, as the result of a collective struggle that reached down to the roots of the problems we face.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor is the author of Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership. She is an assistant professor of African American Studies at Princeton University.
BECOMING MEN: BLACK Masculinities in a South African Township has made me reflect on adolescent life as a person who grew up in a township. It made me reflect on how I engaged with girls, how I engaged in risky behaviour and how I had to navigate between being a serious boy, or what the book refers to as an “academic” boy, and being a cool kid.

The book has also made me go back and ponder on how I dealt with questions of homophobia and how I related to masculinities that are different to how boys are expected to behave. Through reading this book, these questions have provided me with the opportunity to confront childhood issues that I never got the opportunity to deal with on this journey of life, as a boy who grew up in a working class township.

“Real” men
The book makes the point that it is important that we talk of masculinities in the plural, instead of masculinity in the singular, as we experience different masculinities. The book further uses the concept of hegemonic masculinities to describe how other masculinities use power to maintain control and domination over women, as well as over other subgroups of men, especially gay men, to constitute the ideal of a “real man”. It explores the dangers of pursuing this ideal of “real men”. It describes this concept of real men, partly, as the ability to support a wife and children through a steady income. And a real man has the ability to face and solve problems, and to demand sexual intercourse with multiple partners.

These masculinities are also pushed by the need to earn respect and must be submitted to in relationships. The danger, however, lies when men fail to live up to these ideals of real men. That creates negative ramifications for the men and they start feeling less of a man, or not real men. By the way, these situations could be avoided if men did not fall into the trap of hegemonic masculinities.

The book also introduces the important concept of the phallus in trying to explain the symbolised power and emptiness in masculinities, which results in problematic behavioural practices. It makes the point that men engage in risky behaviours such as smoking, having unprotected sex, dating more than one partner and engaging in gangsterism to prove that they are real boys.

Malose Langa, in trying to get the young boys he interviews in this book to take pictures of what they like and things they wished for in life, was surprised when they took pictures of big houses, fancy cars, fancy clothes and money. When he tried to understand why this was the case, the boys replied, “but these are the materials that make you earn respect and different women, and thus power in society.”

This proves that the teachings of this capitalist society have influenced the shaping of masculinities of young adolescent boys.

Absent fathers
The boys also reflected on their absent fathers and how this has impacted their lives and how many of their mistakes are, according to them, a result of their absent fathers failing to be there to show them the way.
Many of the boys the book categorises as tsotsi boys blamed this – these are boys who bunked classes, disrespected teachers and engaged in dodgy behaviour at school. They blamed all their actions on the problem of their absent fathers and them not knowing their fathers. They believed those fathers would have guided them and advised them on a right path, and this was the case as well with sex jaros (boys who are popular with girls). However, it was also interesting to me how they did not recognise the presence of their stepfathers. I wondered how stepfathers reconcile themselves with such issues.

They raised the issue that knowing your biological father means knowing your true father and the clan that you originate from, and this was important in your journey in becoming a man and in shaping as a man. I guess this is why the book reflects that stepfathers were not deemed important.

The role of religion

The book reflects on religion as playing a huge and very important part in the shaping of men. It draws the case of sex jaros, and the zeal to date and sleep with more than one woman, and how boys able to do this were called izikhokho (legend). Those who could not do this, or were not keen to do it, were laughed at and made fun of. However, as a way to resist this, academic boys used their Christian ideals to resist the pressure that was created by this situation, and more importantly to resist peer pressure.

This question of Christianity provided for me as a reader a learning curve as I thought Christian people enjoyed being abazalwane (most dedicated Christians) and this made them feel recognised as Christians. But the book reveals that this was actually not the case at all, at least as far as the Christian boys who participated in the book were concerned. However, religion reflected a different image when it came to resolving issues of homophobia, as boys relied on religion to dismiss the notion of gays and how this breaks the cycle of the family. Therefore, religion was a tool used by participants to justify homophobia. And this was quite interesting – how religion can play different dialectical roles in the shaping of a man.

The book answers questions

The book answers the many questions that many of us have, about why men and especially young men, in their journey of becoming a man, always wish for boy children. The answer to this goes back to the question of absent fathers, and how young men want to be the father they could not have and relive their imaginations of the role they wished their fathers played in their lives, should they have been present. However, they stepped up to this role even if the child turned out to be a girl.

The book provides an important lesson in trying to understand masculinities. It first provides absent fathers with the picture of how their absenteeism affects the boy child. It also provides parents with tools in analysing and understanding the psyche of their boy child and thus makes it easier to respond. It makes it easier to analyse and to help mitigate or deal with the behaviour of men, and their engagement in violence against women, as the root cause of such behaviour is indirectly articulated in the book. It provides some serious policy alternatives for government in understanding the subject of masculinities and how to start dealing with its dangers.

And most importantly, the book provides a very important reflection for men, and some psychological help if you like, to revisit their defects and face issues in their life they did not have the opportunity to deal with psychologically, and which have in many ways influenced the way they reflected to the world. It is for exactly these reasons that I recommend Molase Langa’s book as a must read.

Siyabulela Mama is co-researcher at the Centre for Post-School Education and Training. And an activist at the Assembly of the Unemployed.

Reading Becoming Men: Black Masculinities in a South African Township has made me reflect on adolescent life as a person who grew up in a township.
It’s true that every revolution needs a theory
But, comrades, to sell theory you need resources
It’s true again, comrades, every revolution needs art
But art itself needs funding
It’s also a truism, comrades, that making revolution
Is in itself an art
But then again
Every art has patrons and financiers
To cut a long story short, comrades
Every revolution needs funders
And to be frank, comrades
Every funder is an investor &
Every investor needs
A return on that investment
So in clear terms, comrades
Funding a revolution is often
The art of doing business with government
And why is that?
Because, comrades, doing business with government
Means running the country
Without the inconvenience of elections
Or the prying of the public eye
Into private space
As much as official politics
Is the art of accumulating capital
Without the inconvenience of having start-up capital
Or being asked for collateral
But to do work (and any business), comrades
You need to dirty your hands
Some things require the special skill
Of rolling up your sleeves
Now everybody knows this -
To clean up the debris
You usually have to slide into the mud
But in special cases
When rough hands and much thicker skins
Are in high demand
It’s not unusual to outsource
After all, in every war
There’s a use for hired guns
It’s called special projects, comrades
Only useless journalists
Hell-bent on besmirching
The good names of public officials
And our ‘Good Samaritan’ corporate citizens
Use ugly names such as ‘Mafioso’
Everyone with some soft matter

Inside their head will surely know
‘Corporate mafia’ is an oxymoron
Invented by ridiculous scandal mongers in the tabloids
Government and business don’t do dirty work
They just outsource some cleaning jobs
To appropriate companies
That’s part of Growth and Redistribution
If you disagree you have
A right to air your views
That’s the terrific thing about our democracy
Every Jill and Jack has a say
Even a poor little brat
Can have the loudest babble
But at the end of the day, comrades
It’s cold cash that provides
The strategic network cable that connects to power
Once you understand this
You will not advocate strange theories and practices
After all, even the scriptures bear testimony
Power and wealth is shared
Between Caesar and God
The people’s duty is very simple
Just give to each what is due
Most importantly
Be prepared to kill and die for both
Just to make the distinction
Between nobility and ordinariness
When the chips are down
The responsible corporate citizen
Will choose his or her own cross
And select the executioners
The point being simply to ensure
He or she does not get the raw deal
Of a mundane death brought about
By the knife of a common criminal
Who will not be able to afford bail
Strike a deal with the police
Or get early parole on account of a terminal disease
That will allow him the comfort
Of playing golf or wrestling cows
As soon as he is ‘conditionally’ released

Mphutlane wa Bofelo is a South African cultural worker, social critic, and Worker-Education practitioner, formerly a lecturer at Workers College and currently the national training coordinator of the Public Servants Association of South Africa. His latest book is Transitions: From Post-Colonial Illusions to Decoloniality, published by Ditiro Media.
Apoem from / for quiet girls

By Maia Marie

I don’t have a language
I don’t have a language.
The one I use is borrowed.
Broken in years ago,
a jagged jigsaw,
a necessity.
Mother tongue, they say,
as if it’s an umbilical cord to some
secret sense of who you are.
They packed theirs in a box,
put an ocean between us.
Now I dream of taking trains
to places I’ve never been.
I was born in this borrowed skin.
I wear it like it’s mine, enunciate
my words.
But can’t make it sing. Not
from my bones.
My mind was shaped to fit these cut corners.
To become success, wrapped in new ways.
Someone they wouldn’t recognise.
A note from a song split off and drifted.
Is this what they wanted?
The ones who weren’t born here.
What are dreams anyway
but something learnt from American TV.
They came here and I’m arriving still,
looking into silence.

Maia Marie is a writer, educator and co-founder of lalela, a place of listening – home, farm and space for retreat – amidst the Magaliesberg mountains. The poem is from a collection that can be downloaded for free from here: https://maiamaries.wordpress.com/
As we remember those who have fallen in the fight against COVID-19, we continue to fight for the living.