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South Africa

The Need for New Leadership for the Working Class in South Africa

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Our comrade Madoda Cuphe discusses current social issues in South Africa, ongoing protests, and the need for political reorganization thirty years after the fall of apartheid. Madoda Cuphe is a South African activist, a member of Zabalaza for Socialism and an NGO called the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC). He was interviewed by Antoine Larrache of Inprecor.

Why is it so important for you to attend the anti-fascist conference?

I am very happy to have attended this international conference. What struck me most is that it was organized by various social movements, unions, and political parties. I think it is high time for a grassroots response to the rise of right-wing politics in Europe, fascism, and the role of the United States in South America.

I am referring to what they did in Venezuela, what they are currently doing in Iran, and the role they are playing in the conflict in Gaza. No one is holding them accountable, and I think it is time for ordinary people to mobilize in solidarity and say: "Not in our name. We are saving humanity. This must stop."

How do you view South Africa's role in this broader situation?

We are living through a very interesting political period on the international stage, in the sense that the rule of law seems to have disappeared. Democracy, as we know it, is under extreme attack. Multilateralism and cooperation among nations have been thrown out the window, replaced by a "every country for itself" approach and a policy of intimidation, particularly by the United States.

South Africa has taken a firm stance on the conflict in Gaza. It has called out Israel and brought the matter before the International Court of Justice, and it has paid a price for this—facing tariffs from the United States and diplomatic humiliation during the president's visit there.

However, there are different dimensions to consider. While South Africa has taken a progressive stance internationally, domestically the ANC is veering sharply to the right. It is implementing neoliberal policies that cut spending on human development and social services, while doing little to halt deindustrialization.

South Africa was once proud of its garment, textile, steel, and automotive industries, but much of this has declined. This has led to the loss of thousands—if not hundreds of thousands—of jobs.

Currently, we have over 10 million unemployed people, largely due to the decline of the manufacturing sector. Our economy now relies heavily on raw materials. As you know, raw material prices fluctuate, and we derive limited benefit. We export these materials to Europe, and the jobs go with them.

This has created a deeply problematic situation. High unemployment leads to crime, despair, and worsening social conditions. We are witnessing social ills we have not seen at this scale before—sexual violence, organized crime, and even the return of treatable diseases.

At the same time, municipalities are underfunded. Communities are collapsing. Garbage is not collected, water

supply is unreliable, toilets are broken, and sewage flows in the streets. Schools are underfunded and deteriorating. Some do not even have proper sanitation. Clinics lack medicine, and doctors are scarce. People queue from 4 a.m., only to return home with basic painkillers—or without treatment at all. In general, there is chaos in many communities.

I believe this situation is linked to a broader global shift to the right, combined with the ANC's adoption of neoliberal policies that reinforce these conditions.

How is the population reacting to this situation?

South Africans are primarily focused on their immediate, domestic challenges.

People can clearly see what is happening internationally, especially through the media. Many understand that what is happening in Gaza is not a conventional war—that civilians, including women and children, are being killed. There is widespread sympathy. However, at the same time, people are struggling to survive. They lack food, housing, safety, electricity, and water.

If we want to connect the Palestinian struggle to South African realities, we must begin with people's own lived conditions and build that connection from there. Unfortunately, in South Africa, the issue has largely been taken up by the Muslim community and framed as a religious issue. While there is strong solidarity, it is often limited to those who feel a religious connection.

This must change. It must reach the broader working class. It is not a religious issue—it is a human issue, a question of solidarity. It must reach the townships and the workplaces.

Can you talk about the current social movements?

We are seeing the emergence of a new generation within the working class. The generation that fought apartheid is aging, and a younger generation has taken its place—one that did not directly experience that struggle.

These young people face enormous challenges. When they look to the future, many see nothing. Youth unemployment is extremely high—around 80%—and many of those affected are young women. Even among graduates, unemployment is widespread.

At the same time, the communities people live in have deteriorated significantly.

There is some mobilization. Recently, there were student-led protests at universities. Students are admitted, but there is no accommodation. Government funding through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme is delayed or not paid, yet students are still expected to cover fees. As a result, students are sleeping in bathrooms or outside, exposing themselves to serious danger in an already violent society.

This is not new. In 2015, the Rhodes Must Fall movement emerged. It began with a symbolic issue—a statue of Cecil John Rhodes—but it reflected deeper frustrations: high fees, exclusion of working-class students, and inequality within higher education.

The movement became a broader struggle, almost like a new phase of liberation. However, it ultimately failed to

connect with communities and trade unions.

Today, as union leader Zwelinzima Vavi has pointed out, South Africa experiences daily uprisings—often unreported. These are driven by anger and focus on immediate issues like water, sanitation, healthcare, and housing.

But these struggles are isolated. They emerge, gain momentum, and then fade—either resolved, suppressed, or exhausted. Leadership is temporary, and experiences are not carried forward. The core issue is not just service delivery—it is the system itself. Without systemic change, these cycles will continue.

The major challenge is coordination. There is no national movement to unify these struggles. Since 1994, that national cohesion has been lost.

The ANC is largely focused on parliamentary politics and is no longer deeply embedded in grassroots struggle. Trade unions focus narrowly on workplace issues and do not sufficiently connect with community struggles.

As a result, there is a serious lack of national leadership. That is the central task facing us today.

Imperialist countries are holding back development. What kind of concrete demands should be made?

The main issue is the ANC's lack of political leadership and political will.

South Africa is not a hopeless case. Unlike some countries, we did not inherit a completely destroyed economy after liberation. In fact, due to apartheid-era isolation, local industries were developed to ensure self-sufficiency. We have a foundation to build on. However, current policies are not driving reindustrialization.

There is an ongoing debate about reviving the economy and reducing dependence on raw material exports. With the global demand for critical minerals increasing, South Africa has an opportunity to use its resources strategically.

At the same time, we must address basic needs—especially housing. Imagine a national program to build one million homes per year. This alone could absorb large numbers of unemployed youth. It would also stimulate demand across industries—construction materials, manufacturing, and services—creating a multiplier effect throughout the economy.

With stable incomes, people would begin to consume more, further driving economic growth. Domestic demand could become a key engine of development. We do not need to rely solely on exporting raw materials or agricultural products. A country that produces food but cannot feed its own people is failing its citizens.

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