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South Africa

Exploding with Rage, Imploding with Self-Doubt—but Exuding Socialist Potential

- Features -

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The fast-reviving South African left is urgently coming to grips with the most acute national crises of structure and agency the country has experienced since the historic freeing of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 and the shift of the entire body politic in favor of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). At that time, the ANC soon took control of the country’s progressive forces, winning mass social hegemony, vanquishing other liberation tendencies (Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness), and dissolving the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front (UDF) that civil society activists founded a decade earlier. It then negotiated the first democratic election, which it won handily in April 1994 under Nelson Mandela’s leadership. Afrikaner state managers and corporate titans, as well as multilateral agencies and other forces of imperialism, demanded from the ANC an elite transition that opened both the macro- and microeconomies. Property rights were granted maximum protection, even though whites had acquired the bulk of those through what is widely termed a crime against humanity: apartheid. [1]

The subsequent rise in unemployment, inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation soon reached some of the worst levels in the contemporary world. The consequent social unrest is now so high that President Jacob Zuma remarked in his February 2015 State of the Nation speech that the prior year’s violent protests numbered 1,907, a post-apartheid record. To put down the unrest, he promised increased “public order policing” personnel and the purchase of a new generation of technologically advanced weapons, including sonar canons, which were first deployed at the 2008 Pittsburgh G20 protests. (However, this policing was not evident three months later when xenophobic protests broke out, and by late April the army was deployed in several black townships instead.) The police were never punished for the 2012 Marikana Massacre when they killed thirty-four striking platinum mineworkers on behalf of Lonmin Plc; as of this writing, a major investigating commission report has sat on Zuma’s desk for weeks without action. [2]

In this conflagration, what survived of the left is now growing by leaps and bounds. Within a decade, it may become a force capable of an electoral challenge to the ANC for state power. But much will depend upon how it regroups amidst shards of splintered radical projects, with myriad questions hotly debated in the movement. Should a new political party be created? Can a new alliance of progressives—the “United Front” (UF)—repeat the 1980s UDF’s successes without making its mistakes, such as excessive caution by a petit-bourgeois leadership? Is an openly Marxist-Leninist ideology appropriate for the largest institution, the metalworkers union, and should it spread through Numsa’s (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) “Movement for Socialism”? Indeed, is that theoretical and rhetorical strategy, harking back to the old National Democratic Revolution, simply a reflection of Numsa’s need to outmanoeuvre the SACP, from which so many (now very disillusioned) leaders and members have come? Most urgently, with deep-seated anti-immigrant sentiments expressed repeatedly by workers and with Zulu ethnicist attacks on immigrants from neighboring countries, can African humanism—Ubuntu, meaning, “We are who we are through others”—much less socialism emerge from the ashes?

Here are some of the recent incidents that may in retrospect amount to what we can consider critical break-points:

o The long-simmering split halfway down the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) was finally resolved in April when its general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi—who is probably still the country’s most popular political figure—was fired by Cosatu’s pro-government bloc. Cosatu is a shadow of the great liberation movement ally that regularly shut down the country before 1994. The expulsion of the largest member, the 350,000-strong Numsa last November, sealed Cosatu’s fate as the refuge of public-sector unions, mineworkers, and others in the labor movement who rely upon nationalist patronage systems and promote corporatist politics. Under their domination,

working-class power withered in recent years—ironically at the same time that the World Economic Forum labelled the country's workers the most militant on earth in its annual Global Competitiveness Report surveys from 2012–2014. In late April, the main Numsa leader, General Secretary Irvin Jim, formally announced that the union's executive would take up the most dramatic of its December 2013 threats to the ANC—the formation of a new workers party: “Without a political organ that is loyal and committed to socialism to mobilize the working class, we are vulnerable.” Jim began meeting with Joseph Mathunjwa, who leads the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu), about the need for an alternative federation that could quickly rival Cosatu in size and social gravity. In late April it appeared such a federation would emerge, potentially with Vavi as its interim secretary. Amcu boasts more than 100,000 members, most of whom had once belonged to Cosatu's National Union of Mineworkers before becoming fed up with its conservatism. After the Marikana Massacre of August 2012, Amcu quickly took over majority representation at the platinum mines. By 2014 it was sufficiently confident to run a successful five-month strike that threatened 80 percent of world supply, winning a 20 percent wage increase. Just weeks later, buoyed with confidence, half of Numsa's members embarked on a five-week strike, winning 10 percent raises. These were three-year deals, so the period before 2017 will be one of labor consolidation as dust settles from the historic split—but also a period of danger as feuding between factions no doubt will lead to more of the assassinations of worker leaders that are beginning to become commonplace in these turf battles.

o The country's first mass-popular political party of the left, the “Marxist-Leninist-Fanonist” Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), entered parliament in mid-2014 after less than a year in existence, bringing 6 percent of the national vote and unprecedented and thoroughly rambunctious energy to the torpid legislature. The twenty-eight EFF parliamentarians disrupted Zuma's speeches by shouting “Pay back the money!,” reminding society of the \$20 million in illegitimate public subsidies for the president's rural mansion, and they repeatedly created chaos in the national and provincial legislatures. But in March and April, the EFF purged four high-profile dissidents opposed to the party's alleged petty corruption. Soon thereafter, EFF “Commander in Chief” Julius Malema's attempted reconciliation with tax authorities was sabotaged by the state, raising the likelihood he will be jailed over \$1.5 million in payments he disputes (in the wake of Malema's lucrative reign of “tenderpreneurship” deal-making during the time he led the ANC Youth League).

1. Despite these setbacks, exceptionally gripping protests against historic racial injustices emerged, which reflect EFF influence in South Africa's politics of symbolic drama. Upon entering parliament last year, Malema vowed that the prominent statue outside the building of South Africa's first prime minister, Louis Botha, would have to fall. On March 11, radical student activist Chumani Maxwele carried human excrement from a porta-pottie in his home township of Khayelitsha to the elite University of Cape Town. He attracted a small crowd of supporters and press, and flung the crap at the dominating statue of Cecil Rhodes, the notorious late nineteenth-century colonist whose Table Mountain land bequest became the university's grounds. The solo protest soon won a wide swath of allies anxious to challenge durable white power there (for example, only five out of more than 200 professors are black South African, “African” in race, though the society is 80 percent African). As the full weight of Rhodes's awful legacy was debated, university leaders on both the left and right were repeatedly humiliated, culminating in the statue's removal to an undisclosed location within a month. The racial justice movement spread to universities in Johannesburg, Durban, and Grahamstown (whose “Rhodes University” needs a name change); there were soon acts of apartheid-statue desecration in other cities, followed by a rise in high-profile land invasions coordinated by the EFF. The ANC was back-footed, and while mouthing mock-shock opposition to xenophobia, also defended land-owner property rights and racist-colonial memorials, sometimes in the same breath. Not spared was Mahatma Gandhi's statue in the central Johannesburg square; while resident in South Africa from 1893–1914, Gandhi had mainly defended Indian (especially mercantile) interests—often even against Africans, whom he looked down upon. [3] This in turn raised fears of a potential revival in Zulu-Indian tensions in the Durban area, where conflicts had brewed over many decades.

o Most traditional progressives located in NGOs and academia—with historically pro-ANC sentiments, yet inexorably moving away from the ruling party after Mandela's 1999 departure—were left out of these processes. But with clicktivism and then placard activism against xenophobia suddenly in vogue, they too had their chance to give voice.

For the elite, Cape Town students' viral #RhodesMustFall protest success was, horrifyingly, matched by what was in essence a #RhodesBordersMustRise pogrom by the local poor against the immigrant poor. Dozens of shack settlements, inner-city areas (especially near migrant-labor hostels), and large townships were suddenly torn with violence. At least ten deaths followed, along with the displacement of several thousand immigrants. In the Durban city center a few hundred Congolese and Nigerian immigrants, well-schooled in defense from their home-country war zones, fought back. The xenophobic attacks did not reach Johannesburg's Hillbrow inner-city zone, where resistance would have been intense because of the immigrants' geographic density. But in less-concentrated sites in shack settlements mainly in the Durban residential periphery, thousands were displaced. By mid-April, more than 1,000 victims were repatriated at their request back to Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi. Even though the public shaming of South Africa was acute and solidarity protests and boycott threats rose against South African embassies and corporations in those countries (as well as in Nigeria), Zuma's government initially did very little to resolve or even properly band-aid the situation. Media adverts, marches, speeches, and campaigning generally missed the point: a layer of barely surviving young men were the main attackers, and they had long lost patience with sanctimonious preaching. Finally, after more than three weeks of open xenophobic war zones, the army was called out to replace the police in several hotspots. That meant that the middle-class NGOs and religious faith leaders who provided emergency charity aid could stabilize refugee camps. Moreover, several anti-xenophobia marches called by these forces during April briefly reclaimed central city spaces. However, the tone of nearly all public commentary on xenophobia was moralizing, unable to comprehend the underlying conditions of misery and desperation that led the lumpen-proletariat to act against so many foreign shopkeepers, workers, and families.

o Then, promisingly, a socialist conference in mid-April brought 175 worker leaders and core activists of ten small revolutionary groups to Johannesburg under the leadership of Numsa. That too, however, revealed limits to the strategy of drawing together a UF collection of left-wing civil society forces on the one hand, while on the other, most Numsa leaders—and most of the micro-movement socialists assembled—desire a Workers' Party (of whatever name it will take) to contest the 2016 municipal elections. The inadequate groundwork and differing notions of what such a party would consist of were also obvious. At its formal launch in Johannesburg on June 26, 2015, the UF will need not only to find campaigns to continually reenergize its activists, but to reflect hard on how to generate resources so as to avoid being an appendage of Numsa. Yet simultaneously Numsa will have to figure out how to both energize its members to support the UF while building its Workers' Party. These complex tasks Numsa seeks to reconcile within what it calls the Movement for Socialism, by fusing the anti-capitalist campaigns of the period ahead with an electoral program that first must be rooted at the municipal scale. Cynics fear that these left initiatives are moving too quickly for their own good, and point to the fatal failures of Tunisian and Egyptian trade unions to make deeper alliances as they embarked upon street protests and overthrew what had been considered stable authoritarian (pro-U.S.) regimes four years ago. But trustworthy community activists likewise believe that the project is moving far too slowly, and that 2015's xenophobic upsurge is proof of a mass constituency that has not been properly organized or integrated into the major progressive institutions. Before it becomes fully fascistic in sociopolitical outlook, they hope this alienated lumpen-proletariat can still be drawn to socialist ideas, if the Numsa-led project picks up speed.

In addition to the question of speed, the conjuncture raises classical problems of space and scale which the South African left has never properly resolved. South Africa is marked by ghettoized masses, living on the far peripheries of the major cities without geographical proximity to empowering institutions, and hence there is a localism in their organic analyses and practices that turns segregation into territorial defense and—in the crucial KwaZulu-Natal province at least—also into rising tribalism. Whether a coherent strategy does emerge to align tempo, territory, and the timing of local, provincial, and national electoral ambitions, there is no question that a threatened nationalist elite and loyalist followers will fight back with a vigor just as intense as the capitalist class' own arrogant reaction.

South Africa's leading fractions of capital, egged on by international bank ratings agencies (Moody's, Fitch, and Standard & Poors) and the Bretton Woods institutions, are now taking full advantage of divisions within the masses: to implement austerity (for example, a 3 percent cut in the real value of social grants this year) and privatize state services, especially electricity; to liberalize labor processes (a dual wage market was introduced in 2014, with more "flexibility" suggested by former unionist and billionaire Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa) and amplify outsourcing;

to transfer more funds offshore even though the foreign debt is at an extremely high level; and to intensify parasitical accumulation (the Johannesburg Stock Exchange regularly breaks records). In part because of the country's energy crisis, in which lights flicker on and off thanks to now near-daily "load-shedding" (blackouts) due to ever-lower coal-fired generating capacity, the economy appears increasingly fragile. If world interest rates are pushed up by the U.S. Federal Reserve later in 2015, if the local stock market finally peaks and mass consumer debt defaults kick in (given that more than half the country's borrowers are officially "credit-impaired"), South Africa's economy might also find itself vulnerable to a full-on crash. Then the left's transition from a war of position to genuine war of movement would be as vital in South Africa as it is in Greece or Spain this year, even if national elections are only in 2019.

Global—Local Pressure Points Stemming from Sub-Imperial Subjugations

The last time this society faced such exceptional turmoil was in the early 1990s, and the result was an unsatisfying compromise that left capitalism stronger—legitimated by a handful of black leaders who a few years earlier had already dispensed with vanishing Soviet-era ideological proclivities in favor of rising neoliberal certainties—and the working class fractured. The fruits of that deal are today rotting in sites we had barely heard of then, like Isipingo. Just ten miles south of my university and home, it is the latest epicenter of a xenophobic upsurge amongst poor South Africans against their even poorer immigrant neighbors from African countries whose political and economic refugees continue to pour into South Africa. Here is an evocative report by two journalists:

Near Jeena's Warehouse in Isipingo, there's a pungent smell of chickens and goats, mixed with muti [traditional medicine] from the nearby market.... Close to half of Jeena's employees went on strike on December 15 for higher wages and bonuses. The supermarket is one of the oldest in the area and one of its biggest employers. Jobs are hard to come by in Isipingo. According to the 2011 census, the neighbourhood, with a population of 19,387, has an employment rate of 37.4 percent. The average household income is \$200 a month. Wholesaler Goolam Khan says he was forced to hire new staff when almost 50 of his employees went on strike. He denies that the casual workers he hired in their place were foreigners, saying he has a strict policy of hiring locals. But he did hire a security company after strikers picketed outside his shop and, he claims, began vandalizing property and intimidating customers. The security company employs foreigners—that's what many believe sparked the first wave of attacks.... [According to one employee], "Shoppers had guns pointed at them and their shopping bags checked by foreigners. How would you feel if someone from outside was making you feel like a criminal in your own country?" When the attacks began, the supermarket closed its doors for two days. Protesters moved from there to the rest of Isipingo, where the streets are lined with foreign-owned shops, and the violence began. [\[4\]](#)

Adding to the indignity are wholesaler-retailer tensions and labor disputes. Here is Cosatu's somewhat inaccurate official response: "The use of foreigners as scab-laborers against striking workers in Isipingo is a typical example of the divisive conduct by some employers, and it cannot be tolerated by Cosatu because it is not only setting up workers against one other, but it encourages violence against African comrades." The South African labor market had become so informalized by the 2000s that repeated OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) surveys ranked only the United States, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand as advanced capitalist countries where it was easier to fire workers. The costs of social reproduction are much lower for immigrants in search of work: they are typically young males whose families stay behind in neighboring countries until they can become rooted. The men, who sometimes send remittances home, will often save money by quadrupling up in small inner-city apartments or township shacks—sometimes sleeping in shifts—which puts upward pressure on rental rates. Unscrupulous employers or landlords can increase their own power by threatening to tell the police and Home Affairs about illegal immigrants, as a weapon of super-exploitation often evoked to avoid wage payments. [\[5\]](#)

Another structural cause of xenophobia is excessive township retail competition: "overtrading." [\[6\]](#) This results from

immigrants—especially from Somalia, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and China—having advantageous relations with wholesalers. The collective credit and bulk purchasing power usually found in immigrant retail syndicates readily swamps the micro-entrepreneurial and usually atomistic existence of “spaza shops” run out of backyard garages by local residents. Predatory pricing characteristic of big corporations is also present. Internecine battles between petty capitalists then move from pricing to physical intimidation. Scores of high-profile “service delivery protests” by communities against their municipal governments have turned into xenophobic looting sprees against the immigrants’ shops, once opportunistic theft emerges in the chaos. The beneficiaries are typically unemployed youth who raid the immigrants’ shops, as well as the original spaza shop owners (and their minivan taxi-driver goods distributors), plus the immigrants’ debtors, who then do not have to repay when the creditors are run out of town.

As a result of this retail overtrading tension, the recent round of xenophobic attacks are sometimes dubiously explained in conspiratorial terms. State Security Minister David Mahlobo said, “We know that there are instigators in those various communities and these are the individuals that we are going to bring to book.” The Greater Gauteng Business Forum’s Pretoria leader, Mpane Baloyi, articulated this sentiment about immigrants two years ago: “Our government should stop issuing asylum to these people; they should rather place them in camps. We don’t want them on our streets, not because we hate them, but due to economic space.” ANC Secretary General Gwede Mantashe used the April violence as an excuse to suggest his government set up formal refugee camps for immigrants, a widely ridiculed idea. Still, the ANC is struggling with the tension between appeasing a populist xenophobia at its base, and trying to retain the image of South Africa as a cosmopolitan modern democracy in which refugees can seek safety. Ultimately it appears that state condemnation of xenophobia only became more serious after brand damage to the Zuma government, and especially to its hopes that Durban will win the 2022 Commonwealth Games (it is the only bidder) and then successfully compete in the bidding for the 2024 Olympics.

But why, on March 30, 2015, did this round of attacks begin? The isiZulu command “abahambe!” (foreigners must go!) was heard often that day, along with “the King has spoken!,” as hundreds were chased from their shops as well as shacks near the Isipingo suburban center. Ten days earlier, Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini had indeed spoken at a “Moral Regeneration” rally in northern KwaZulu-Natal:

we talk of people [South Africans] who do not want to listen, who do not want to work, who are thieves, child rapists and house breakers.... When foreigners look at them, they will say, let us exploit the nation of idiots. As I speak, you find their unsightly goods hanging all over our shops, they dirty our streets. We cannot even recognise which shop is which, there are foreigners everywhere.... We ask foreign nationals to pack their belongings and go back to their countries. [roar of applause] [7]

When does “foreign” begin as a concept here? As Malema told a rally against xenophobia in Johannesburg’s violent Alexandra township:

These borders are not our borders. These borders are imposed on us by the colonizers. I have come here to plead with you.... No Zimbabwean has taken your job. You want a job, go to Luthuli House. Take every Zimbabwean back to Zimbabwe, and you will still be unemployed. You can kill all the people of Zimbabwe, and you will still die in poverty. Your problem is the ANC. [8]

It was 130 years ago in Berlin when white colonial officials carved Africa’s boundaries at a conference led by Germany, Britain, Portugal, France, and Belgium. At the time, Rhodes was a thirty-two-year-old diamond entrepreneur successfully assembling the DeBeers monopoly by hook or by crook, and within five years he would become the Cape Colony’s governor and lead the invasion of several countries to the north in his desire for Cape-to-Cairo British control. With Queen Victoria cash-strapped, this was “imperialism on the cheap,” but the model for looting Africa was confirmed in 1885 with the carving of artificial territorial boundaries on a giant map in Kaiser

Wilhelm's Berlin mansion. This in turn facilitated legal contracts for property followed by installation of telegraphs, railroads, bridges, roads, ports, and other infrastructure required to extract minerals, timber, and cash crops. Precise border lines were often decided by flips of the coin, and these split different ethnicities with abandon. In the landmine-strewn border zone where I have spent most of my time in Zimbabwe, Manicaland's Bvumba Mountain next to Mozambique, one side of the Manica clan speaks Portuguese, the other side speaks English. The post-colonial politics of African state power confirmed these illogical boundaries because border disputes were already the subject of many territorial power struggles and full-fledged wars would result from any attempt to unscramble the Berlin "Scramble for Africa." [\[9\]](#)

Just as in the era of Berlin, today's global form of uneven and combined development features global capitalist overaccumulation, excessive financial speculation, and geopolitical shifts in interests that follow economic logics. The global crisis of 2008 hit hard here by early 2009 and soon had destroyed a million jobs. There have been no subsequent prospects for "growth" (conventionally defined as per capita Gross Domestic Product increases): if one discounts the platinum, gold, coal, and other mineral exports that reflect non-renewable resource depletion, the 2008 World Bank estimate of \$245 net negative "change in wealth per capita" confirms that South Africa's resource-cursed model of accumulation and crony-capitalist collusion with corrupt state officials is undesirable even in banal economic terms. [\[10\]](#)¹⁰ The distorted gender relations, social engineering, and massive ecological damage associated with the mining industry's migrant labor system is bad enough, of course. Because so much surplus is extracted from all the implicit subsidies involved, some still call this an "articulation of modes of production"; the term was historically understood by communist intellectuals as apartheid's underlying material logic, an articulation between capitalism and the pre-capitalist Bantustan homelands that had reasonably been expected to end in 1994. Rosa Luxemburg, who had read accounts of South Africa and Congo's plantations, had described this process brilliantly as early as 1913 in her *Accumulation of Capital*. But as the late Marxist geographer Neil Smith had warned in his PhD thesis in 1984, "Today the 'articulation of modes of production' is a product of the developments and limits of capital, not vice versa. More concretely, it is the logic of uneven development which structures the context for this articulation." [\[11\]](#)

After 1994, unevenness rose to extremes in South Africa. Neoliberalism became the generic public-policy default mode in sector after sector, and liberalized trade and finance were reflected in the rising power and profits enjoyed in commerce, banks, and ratings agencies—as well as construction companies, since real estate speculation was a logical outlet for capital still trapped inside the country by residual exchange controls. The controls were further loosened in the 2015 national budget, so that wealthy South Africans can take out nearly \$1 million annually, two-and-a-half times more than last year. Yet the foreign debt grows—and now exceeds \$140 billion (as high in relative terms as during the 1985 debt crisis that helped end apartheid)—in part so the Reserve Bank can cover a huge current account deficit. That deficit ballooned mainly thanks to recent outflows of profits, dividends, and interest since the largest Johannesburg firms (such as Anglo, DeBeers, South African Breweries, mining houses, insurance companies, and IT firms) were allowed to relist their primary stock market affiliations to London in 1999.

This kind of parasitical accumulation is a global trend, but in South Africa the deleterious role of East Asian imports (and, more recently, Chinese credit) has been as profound as anywhere in Africa. In exchange for future favors on the continent as the continent's de facto gatekeeper, Beijing supported Pretoria's entry into its much-vaunted twenty-first century alliance with Delhi, Brasilia, and Moscow: BRICS. But instead of breaking dependency with the West, several critical aspects of imperialism were amplified, including:

- o global financial integration (through new multilateral banks already pre-committed to Bretton Woods orthodoxies);
- o global climate policy (the 2009 UN Copenhagen climate summit signalled the strategy of joining—not fighting—the U.S. government in order to ensure no binding emissions controls);
- o global surveillance of citizenries (the BRICS are just as prying as the United States-United

Kingdom-Australia-Canada-New Zealand Five Eyes); and even

o global soccer (FIFA's Sepp Blatter was happy to ensure his hosts would be South Africa in 2010, Brazil in 2014, and Russia in 2018—for what better relegitimation of the great game's worst manifestations?). [\[12\]](#)

South Africa's sub-imperialist standpoint here is not in doubt, in spite of leftist rhetoric some of its leaders picked up while exiled in Moscow or Prague before 1990. Last August there was no better reflection of the durable geopolitical and military alliance Zuma had made with imperialism than his endorsement of Barack Obama's Africom missions in Africa, and in 2013 Obama visited South Africa twice (once for Mandela's funeral). Not only did Washington (and local Zionists) apparently pressure Zuma to endorse continued strong diplomatic relations with Israel last August, even during Tel Aviv's latest round of Gaza mass murders, but as Zuma also told an applauding National Press Club audience in Washington during the U.S.-Africa summit, "We secured a buy-in from the US for Africa's peace and security initiatives.... As President Obama said, the boots must be African." Pretoria is apparently the deputy sheriff in training, with Zuma's likely 2019 replacements—either Cyril Ramaphosa, Mantashe, or his ex-wife (and African Union chairperson) Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma—all likely to continue toeing the line.

The agenda behind most aspects of the regional domination Zuma promotes is to secure contracts for corporations, just as did his predecessors Kgalema Motlanthe (2008–2009), Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), and Mandela (1994–1999). Pretoria's consistent support to erratic neighbors like President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and the Swazi tyrant monarch Mswati, or nearby, the Angolan kleptocracy led by the Dos Santos family, often appear motivated by familial, personal, or long-standing liberation movement loyalties. But there is no question that the region's powerhouse has strengthened various economic grips since 1994, and that the grand infrastructure projects proposed to link the region—such as the \$100 billion Inga Hydropower Projects on the Congo River (three times larger than China's Three Gorges Dam), the \$30 billion coal railroad from an Indian Ocean port to Botswana, and the \$25 billion South Durban port expansion—will go ahead only because (and if) the South African state provides generous subsidies. That most beneficiary firms in the regional mining industry, for example, were once South African but are now headquartered abroad has not really shifted power relations in Southern Africa. But a recent innovation is that a great many of the regional direct-investment inroads made by white-owned Johannesburg-based capital—especially in construction, retail, finance, mining, energy, agro-forestry, and tourism—have been joined by black elites. They sometimes tussle with each other (e.g., Zuma's nephew Khulubuse has clashed over Congolese resources with Zuma's former housing minister and now political enemy Tokyo Sexwale). Sometimes deals they thought would be lucrative—like the 2006 deal-making between Mbeki and Central African Republic dictator Francois Bozize to create a national diamond monopoly—backfire badly, as in 2013 when fifteen South African army troops were killed "defending Joburg businesses" in Bangui.

But this mainly destructive regional role is one of the central contradictions for the left to come to grips with, too. If BRICS and the West both count on South Africa as the commercial gateway to Africa, the main provider of merchant logistics, and the military protector of the nexus of imperial/sub-imperial investment, this will likely raise state spending on white-elephant infrastructure that can never be repaid without ongoing subsidies. Durban's port, for example, charges a world-leading processing fee of \$1,100 per container (only Cape Town's is in the same range, and Singapore's is just one-sixth the price). Local community activists and environmentalists have begun what could be a multi-decade battle against the huge port-petrochemical expansion, insisting that these resources should tackle the basic-needs infrastructure backlog (water, sanitation, electricity, roads, community facilities, and public services) and provide better incomes in places like Isipingo, which is on the southern edge of the mega-project proposal. Electricity is the most obvious of these sites where the different priorities of the society are obvious and where the UF could prove its mettle, bringing together electricity workers, consumers (especially women), and environmentalists who have the potential to move in harmony, given the extreme local-global scale conflicts involved. The single most widely disparaged institution in the country is the fast-commercializing parastatal Eskom (the Electricity Supply Commission), known to all who face power cuts as "Eishkom"—"Eish" being a vernacular term for a dismayed "Goddamn!"

Potentials of Electric Power Politics

The UF has the possibility to crack open the toxic cement of social differentiation that the 1994 elite transition closed up over the last two decades. Cracks are appearing, and there are many hands with hammers. For instance, fusing the socialist intelligentsia, deep labor movement experiences, and community activism, Trevor Ngwane founded the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee fifteen years ago, just at the time he tackled the World Bank (as seen in the popular documentary *Two Trevors Go To Washington*), epitomizing South Africans' exceptional local-global anti-capitalism. He had just been fired by the ANC as its Soweto chairperson and as Johannesburg city councilor once he publicly opposed water privatization. Now a Marxist PhD student of urban social movements, Ngwane remains a dynamic visionary in the UF and his campaigners have reconnected thousands of households. Indeed, out of more than a million residents of Soweto, 80 percent do not pay their bill as they have "commoned" the electricity supply. [\[13\]](#)

In the same spirit, but aiming at life-saving medicines, the Treatment Action Campaign was rising in the early 2000s and by 2004 had raised sufficient pressure to reverse the Mbeki regime's AIDS-denialist policy of refusing immune-system-strengthening drugs to the country's 5.5 million HIV+ residents. This fight also required defeating the World Trade Organization, the U.S. government, Big Pharma, and the very concept of intellectual property. As a result, today 3 million people get free medicines (that had cost \$10,000/year in the late 1990s) and thanks to widespread availability of generics, life expectancy has soared from fifty-two to sixty-two in the past decade. Amongst the UF interim leadership are the two longest-serving general secretaries of that campaign, Zackie Achmat and Vuyiseka Dubula. [\[14\]](#) Others with high-profile struggle identities include former Abahlali baseMjondolo shackdweller movement secretary Bandile Mdlalose, former Intelligence Minister Ronnie Kasrils (who served more than fifty years in the ANC leadership before breaking with it in 2013, accusing Mandela of having done a "Faustian Pact" with the International Monetary Fund twenty years earlier), and the political ecologist and Fourth Internationalist activist Brian Ashley, who founded Cape Town's Alternative Information and Development Centre. His institute sponsors the Million Climate Jobs Campaign, which poses creative options to allow metalworkers to turn their welding skills to making turbines for wind and tidal energy, automakers to produce new forms of public transport, and hole-digging mineworkers to return home to townships with the skills required to create underground biogas digesters for sanitation (and supplying cooking methane).

Numsa workers built a momentarily successful anti-Eskom alliance once before; in 2013 the union demanded Eskom lower a price increase from 16 percent to 8 percent (when inflation was 6 percent). Numsa also has won major worker wage concessions as the main union within Eskom as well as within its major electricity buyers, including the world's biggest mining house, BHP Billiton. The latter's apartheid-era deals were renewed by the ANC such that it receives electricity (around 5 percent of the national grid's output) at about an eighth of the cost of household consumers. Explaining this level of generosity, a revolving door between BHP Billiton and the South African state allowed the former finance minister (Derek Keys), former Eskom treasurer (Mick Davis, who later ran Xstrata), and the former state energy regulator (Xolani Mkhwanazi) to land top leadership roles in the mining house after leaving the state. With the UF combining trade union knowledge, environmentalist critiques, consumer outrage, and community-reconnection sensibility, an entirely different, fresh way of thinking about South Africa's coal-fired electricity addiction is likely to emerge.

Those community protests over electricity and related matters are ubiquitous, sometimes victorious, but also full of dangers, including a localistic perspective without ideology. That problem dates back more than fifteen years, to when waves of post-apartheid unrest swept urban and even small-town South Africa. One not atypical example is in oThongathi, just north of Durban's main airport, where in early April 2015 xenophobic attacks on foreign shackdwellers by local shackdwellers led to hundreds of displaced immigrants. Conditions in these shacks create such desperation, according to one resident interviewed by the *DurbanDaily News* last October, that three boys were electrocuted at an Eskom substation: "They were connecting electricity to their homes so they could sleep with a warm meal in their stomachs." The UF will need to address these kinds of contradictions with a systematized

approach to electricity that delivers meaningful Free Basic Electricity (the state gives only a tokenistic 50 kilowatt per household each month) and charges BHP Billiton and other gluttonous users much more. The shifting of Numsa welders, out of the smelters into renewable energy manufacture, would also signal visionary ecologically sound socialist potentials.

But a lack of linkages to one another and to similar water, housing, health care, and education protests reflect how much a common democratic organizational home is desperately needed, just as when civic associations pulled together regional associations and then a South African National Civic Organization in 1992, or within the 1983–1991 UDF. [15] The fiery community protests have had their dark side: scores of electrocutions when activists reconnect wires without caution, kids not being able to attend school during demonstrations, and the periodic outbursts of xenophobia. On the latter front, Sikwebu expressed this goal in a 2012 labor seminar, “A search in our region, the rest of the African continent, the global South and the rest of the world for forms of cooperation and solidarity around energy that will ultimately replace competition and avoid workers of different countries being pitted against each other.” [16]

In 2012, Numsa’s deputy general secretary Carl Kloete had offered one of the most optimistic scenarios of how, in the wake of Eskom’s repeated failures, a different public institution might emerge from the mess:

- o Ownership of energy resources must be taken out of private hands and be put in the hands of the public through a mix of different forms of collective ownership, such as public utilities, cooperatives, municipal-owned entities, and other forms of community energy enterprises where full rights for workers are respected and trade union presence is permitted. Energy entities that were privatized must be taken back and put under public ownership and control.

- o When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are referring to energy being a public or common good that is publicly financed and comprehensively planned. We want to roll back the anarchy of liberalized energy markets.

- o When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are expressing our determination to resist commodification of electrical power and our desire that energy systems should not be for profit, but rather have as their mandate service provision and meeting of universal needs.

- o When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are speaking of a system where workers, communities, and consumers have control and a real voice in how energy is produced and used. We are calling for constituency-based governing councils in place of boards of directors in all energy entities. Existing state or publicly owned energy entities that act as private companies and on the basis of a profit motive need to be “socialized.”

- o When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are calling for the accrual of a large share of economic benefits of energy production and consumption to producers and owners of the actual means through which energy is generated, transmitted, and distributed.

When we talk about social ownership of energy systems we are referring to energy systems that respect our environmental rights, our rights for survival, and those of future generations. Socially owned energy systems must prioritize renewable energy as part of respecting our environmental rights. [17]

These values hit bottom-up socialist and environmental justice buttons, and in this sector at least, should be the basis for a “Transitional Demand” strategy (a description used by Numsa). If the “social distance” between Numsa’s better-paid industrial membership and the extremely poor communities now beginning to join the UF is to be bridged, it will only occur if Numsa is serious about this broad-based socialism. How might affordable-energy activists in

communities as well as socialist feminists express their interests in such a program? Consistent with Numsa's perspective, I think they might first insist on more Free Basic Electricity (FBE) than at present, cross-subsidized by charging more to wealthier over-consumers. As University of the Western Cape political science professor Greg Ruiters has pointed out, FBE accounts for "a very tiny proportion of the total electricity sold in South Africa" and is "generally inadequate for either meeting basic needs or for meaningful pro-poor development." Instead, suggests Ferial Adam of 350.org in the Earthlife Africa booklet *Free Basic Electricity: A Better Life for All*, a raise to 200 kilowatts/household/month is reasonable. These are the sorts of details that correspond to the Numsa conference on socialism's mandate for the future, namely, to bring revolutionary class consciousness into every terrain of battle ahead.

From Ideological Positioning to Concrete Struggles

In the socialism conference, Numsa president Andrew Chirwa took great pains to chide—in a comradely way—his new socialist allies, twice, about how to understand the conjuncture and especially his union's leadership. He accused the far left of "downplaying the significance of Numsa's ideological orientation as a Marxist-Leninist inspired union" and ignoring "that our theoretical perspectives remain deeply rooted in the historical contributions of the SACP, when the party was led by Marxist-Leninists." [\[18\]](#)

Everyone on the left has rich traditions to draw upon in South Africa's national and class struggles, and by invoking SACP lingo (including the National Democratic Revolution) and the 1955 Freedom Charter (which calls for nationalizing the mines, banks, and monopoly capital), the Numsa leaders are carefully declaring that a great many more of the better cadres of the SACP and Cosatu, who support the traditional articulation of socialism, should join them. In a similar vein, the EFF had warmly embraced Frantz Fanon as a bridge towards the Black Consciousness tradition whose strength was always greater in the society's collective memory of Steve Biko's 1970s campaigning than in any recent Black Consciousness struggles (and indeed the key link to contemporary Black Consciousness, the talented ideologue Andile Mngxitama, was one of the four EFF leaders fired in April).

What strikes me as far more durable than the sometimes semantic positioning over revolutionary traditions is the record of class and social struggle that South Africans will compel Numsa and other socialists to contemplate, the closer they get to the poorest of the proletariat. The logical appeal of Numsa's socialism is in the growing importance of wage struggles (with a public sector likely to go on strike) and the potential for a shorter working week to share employment. Here, while Numsa led the fight against the ANC finance minister's 2014 imposition of a dual labor market sub-minimum youth wage, that still leaves the challenge of mass employment programs aimed at the youth, which the union leaders—and indeed the entire left—have been unable to articulate convincingly.

In other campaigns, Numsa also has regularly challenged the tendency towards privatization of state services, including widening of the main Johannesburg highway. Electricity is one sector where it has huge potential power to align workers, communities, women, and environmentalists, as noted above. For those in the broad working class over their heads in debt, again Numsa has stood regularly for lower interest rates in its solo battles against the South African Reserve Bank. But more collective strategies against debt, such as the early 1990s "bond boycotts" (collective defaults on mortgages) will be vital, and harking back to that era, Numsa was again the national leader in contrast to an SACP financial sector initiative aiming mainly at ameliorating debt by softening credit blacklisting (without addressing the debt load).

But these micro-campaigns will only work if there is a macro-economic shift away from the global vulnerabilities South Africa continues to suffer. Numsa has regularly lobbied for capital controls (in part so as to lower interest rates), has questioned the rise of foreign debt to the \$140 billion level (and like Syriza, must consider how to advocate a debt payment freeze), and promotes import restrictions based not on protectionism but on the

combination of worker power and opportunities for new industrial policies favouring cooperatives and mutual ownership. Most acutely, given Numsa's role in base metals beneficiation, the ongoing global commodities price crash should allow the call for ending the country's economic dependence upon minerals extraction and processing. One related reason is the intensified metabolism of the dirtiest components of industrial capitalism, which calls forth the argument Naomi Klein makes: This Changes Everything. Climate change will intensify the transmission of ecological crisis, and these socialists' Million Climate Jobs strategy will have to ramp up into much higher visibility and much wider endorsement. [19]

Finally, much of the argument above has followed the patriarchal logic of anti-capitalism as practiced for generations in South Africa. A feminist-socialist angle will embrace the full challenge of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and associated social reproduction crises, including rampant domestic violence and crime. The attention given to the gendered impacts and socialist-feminist strategies (e.g., Basic Income Grant and free services plus crèches and eldercare), through unity of poor and working people, will test whether a UF, Movement for Socialism, new labor federation, and Workers' Party can be as inclusive as the conditions demand.

And it is here where Chirwa ended his speech to the socialism conference, in a strategic argument drawn directly from The Communist Manifesto that should draw to a close two decades of often pointless post-apartheid positioning by leftists, in favor of a coherent movement corresponding to South Africa's urgent conditions during this era of xenophobic class fragmentation: "formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat." As Chirwa concluded, "This quote best summarizes our perspectives."

[1] Background from my perspective can be found in Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition* (London, Pluto Press, 2014); John Saul and Patrick Bond, *South Africa—The Present as History* (London: James Currey Press, 2014).

[2] Jane Duncan, *The Rise of the Securocrats* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2014).

[3] Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-bearer for Empire* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[4] Athandiwe Saba and Paddy Harper, "[Xenophobic Violence: Where Did It All Begin?](#)," CityPress, April 19, 2015.

[5] Baruti Amisi, Patrick Bond, Nokuthula Cele, and Trevor Ngwane, "Xenophobia and Civil Society: Durban's Structured Social Divisions," *Politikon*, 38, no. 1 (2011): 59–83.

[6] Andrew Plastow, "[Spaza Shops, Xenophobia and Their Impact on the South African Consumer](#)," April 20, 2015.

[7] [Listen to Exactly What King Goodwill Zwelithini Said about Foreigners](#)," The Times(Johannesburg), April 16, 2015,

[8] Richard Poplak, "[Gunshots and Gogos](#)," DailyMaverick, April 20, 2014.

[9] Ian Phimister, "[Unscrambling the Scramble: Africa's Partition Reconsidered](#)," paper presented to the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, August 17 1992.

[10] World Bank, *The Changing Wealth of Nations* <http://data.worldbank.org/news/the-...> (Washington, DC, 2011), 201.

[11] Neil Smith, *Uneven Development* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 156.

[12] Patrick Bond and Ana Garcia, eds., *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique* (London, Pluto Press, 2015).

[13] Trevor Ngwane, “Sparks in the Township, <http://newleftreview.org/II/22/trev...>” New Left Review, July-August 2003,

[14] Mandisa Mbali, *South African AIDS Activism and Global Health Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[15] Mzwanele Mayeksio, *Township Politics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1996).

[16] Dinga Sikwebu, “Motivations For a Socially-Owned Renewable Energy Sector, October 15, 2012, <http://www.numsa.org.za/article/mot...>

[17] Karl Cloete, [Speech by Deputy General Secretary Karl Cloete to Renewable Energy Conference—Envisioning a Socially-Owned Renewable Energy Sector, February 6, 2012, Johannesburg, South Africa](#),” February 22, 2012,

[18] Andrew Chirwa, “Opening Speech to the Numsa Conference on Socialism,” Boksburg, April 16, 2015. This will appear online shortly at <http://numsa.org.za> .

[19] <http://climatejobs.org.za/>