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WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY HAS THE ANC 'BUILT' IN SOUTH AFRICA?

by Dale T McKinley

An early capitalist frame

When the ANC was formed in 1912 the majority of its founding members wanted it to be the organisational vehicle for a specific section of the black population to become a key part of the capitalist system. From that point on, the concept of political freedom for all black South Africans was aligned to a nationalist politics that accepted the capitalist class system. Flowing from this, was also the acceptance of the specific need for the economic empowerment of those class of black people who could join - and potentially eventually replace - white capitalists as the foundation for a wider-scale 'economic empowerment' of the black majority (i.e., workers and the poor).

Separating the political from the economic

This conceptual understanding and practical line of march was then consolidated decades later in the 1960s as part of the theory of 'Colonialism of a Special Type' (CST). The core of the argument was that black South Africa was a colony of white South Africa. As a result, the African population was seen as having no major 'class divisions at present' and therefore the immediate task was to fight for the national liberation of the 'colonised'.

That fight would be carried out through a 'National Democratic Revolution' (NDR) with a multi-class liberation movement (the ANC) acting as the main vehicle, but with the working class (the SACP being its self-declared political vanguard) constituting the leading revolutionary force within it. According to the NDR, since not all classes had an objective interest in fundamental transformation of a post-apartheid South Africa (i.e., a non-capitalist society), the leading role of the working class would ensure that the liberation struggle could be extended towards socialism. Thus the struggle had two stages: the first for a national democratic state (non-racial, non-sexist etc.), the second for a non-capitalist society (under the general rubric of 'socialism').

As a result, the ANC's subsequent path to power was wrapped up in a hopelessly contradictory liberation 'model' - the political side (the struggle for democratic power) had become detached from the economic side (the struggle for social and material power). Such a strategic 'model' remained constant throughout the decades leading up to the early 1990s when formal negotiations began with the apartheid state.

'Empowering' whom?

What this meant was that after the ending of apartheid and the attainment of political freedom, the whole idea of black 'empowerment' would need to be practically implemented as part of a post-apartheid



'Capitalism' -
by Judy Anne Seidman

deracialised capitalism. In other words, the main aim would have to be the empowerment of an emergent and black capitalist class (in both the public and private sectors) as a means of overcoming racial oppression. This 'empowerment' would then trickle down to the black majority of workers and the poor as time went on and at some point in the future that majority would evidently take command of the ANC alliance and overturn the capitalist system and the newly empowered black capitalists within it.

As we have witnessed since 1994, what this has meant is the embracing of a corporatised power wherein, despite the holding of regular elections, popular, democratic will/choice is substituted for elite will/choice. The various leaders of the ANC have gone about presenting their own strategic choice, as the only route that South Africa's new 'democracy' can take due to the 'balance of forces'. This was then quickly translated into the 'will of the people'.

What thus emerges is an approach to democracy that orients to existent, dominant political and economic power (the state and capital) as opposed to the contingent power of the majority of people (workers and the poor). Within this frame, access to and control of state power (through the political party form) becomes the main vehicle and guarantor for new (deracialised) class formation and accumulation.

What kind of democracy?

While the negotiated compromise between the ANC and the apartheid regime ensured that there would now be democratic elections and a new (black) government, it also ensured there would be little change in the architecture of the state and the overall governance model. The South African 'house' was, with a few pre-handover changes and additions here and there, being 'bought as is'.

In practical terms this meant that the new ANC government was left with only one real option; to set about shifting the governance and policy veranda chairs and creating new 'rooms in the house' in order to try and address the various political and socio-economic rights of the new democratic dispensation as contained in the Constitution. In other words, in the foundational phase of the new South Africa, the previous culture of capitalist-apartheid governance (leaving aside its inherently racist nature) that was riven with secretive,

internally hierarchical, technocratic, class-biased, non-responsive, and top-down 'delivery' characteristics, was largely passed on and (re)learnt.

Despite the passing of many new (and in many cases progressive) laws and the setting up of new national, provincial and local state administrations, institutions and agencies, there was a generalised lack of a parallel drive to transform governance service culture and create avenues for more direct democratic participation and oversight by the people. As a result the state became (over the last 25 years), largely an avenue for inter-party political deployment and patronage centred on personal, factional and class interests.

Put a different way, the democracy that the ANC 'built' was quickly captured, not primarily for the benefit of the governed but for a new (and old) class of elites. In turn, this provided fertile ground for seeing 'democratic' institutions, processes and power (whether in the party or the state) as the main ticket to accumulate power and money. The corrupting organisational and political 'culture' produced has now become all-consuming, resulting in South Africa's democracy taking on the character of an auction, with the various 'prizes' going to the most connected and/or highest bidder.

In metaphorical terms, while the post-apartheid journey that the ANC has taken us on has seen some internal improvements and external additions to the house that is South Africa, the house itself not only rests on rotten structural foundations, but most of the improvements and additions have not been designed for the majority of the house's inhabitants and have been undertaken largely without their involvement. It is this consciously constructed, combined and uneven house development that is the main marker of post-apartheid South Africa's democracy.

It's time to rebuild and remake the house and thus also, our democracy!

EDITORIAL

Hello and welcome to the last edition of Workers World News, issue 129 for 2024. We are moving towards the end of another year in crisis for the world, but also a year where progressive forces have come together, some more than others, to realise that there is really no time like the present for an international working-class revolution against the forces of violent nation-state and patriarchal capitalism. It is also the time of the year for most to go on holidays, but for many precarious, retail, undocumented and student workers the season is one of mass exploitation by the retail and service industries where there is no double pay for holiday and weekend work, not to mention no vacation/holidays for these workers and even in big corporate workplaces, the exploitation at the bottom sees little respect to labour laws, getting away with not paying overtime hours for example. Which brings me to the theme that set in appropriately for this issue - that of the worker.

Dale McKinley's lead article on the cover speaks of Colonisation of a Special Type-CST that is the situation of South Africa, where the history of the ANC and its type of democracy is explored and how the 'will of the people' was denied. This difference between political and economic freedom is analysed in this context and what I call the "new blackjacks", capitalists who profited from the new political democracy within the same liberal system recycled from apartheid with just new managers responsible for the lives of the working class, abandoned by the party they once believed a rainbow future under a new type of democracy but it was just the old wolf in sheep's clothing.

In Gender News, page 3, an organised coalition of revolutionary anarchists in South Korea, Anarchist Yondai (Solidarity) presents the struggle of women workers and the exploitation they face at their university campus showing how 'female workers' are 'at the bottom of an intersectional hierarchy.' Central to the struggle is the organising of student activists who are in touch with the 'sensibilities of the masses on the ground.' The abuse of older women workers, not only at universities but in general corporate employment is an international issue for women workers, amongst the other intersecting exploitations the article speaks to.

In Educational Series, page 4, Lucien van der Walt takes us through a history of the most far-reaching and radical union for its time- Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), a non-party-aligned union mass movement in southern Africa. They spoke of take-overs of mines, factories and farms, had an anti-capitalist approach and were involved in every aspect of social organising in the townships and included women. Read more about the lessons that can be learnt from the ICU in its heyday, what keeps them as 'one big union' to why they fall and what made it a union that terrified governments.

In our Struggle Section, page 6, Nicolas Dieltiens writes about the Unpaid Benefits Conference held in Johannesburg by the Unpaid Benefits Campaign (UBC). If you are one of the many South Africans tired of the scams and waiting for your hard-earned money in pensions from administrators of funds, UBC has vital information for you. UBC is determined to be holding those accountable for holding back of workers pensions, using a multi-sector approach to get back the money. In a flawed and corrupt system, where workers are always at the back end of the receiving line, it's important to know people like Dr Weitz Botes from the Office of the Compensation Commissioner within the Department of Health, one of the rare few in the system actually interested in helping the people they serve.

From the ILRIG Resource Centre, page 5, Anastasya Eliseeva details the Cape Town School and shares some of the highlights and photos she captured. Our year usually closes with our 2 main political schools where ILRIG partner activists are invited to be popular education students and various radical and Freirian pedagogies are used to inculcate an atmosphere of sound, researched, radical and feminist education.

On the Creative page 8, two poems, one by an anonymous 'proletarian', **We Have Fed You All For a Thousand Years** and Kyle Dargan, the American poet's **But My Chains**, are reminiscent of working-class culture and you may certainly relate. Our pull-out poster by Anastasya Eliseeva, depicts the strength of the working class, held up by hands of working women, called RISE! Also find a tribute to the late James Mathews, an anti-apartheid resistant poet, with a beautiful portrait by Anastasya of his iconic style.

The 'house on fire' analogy Dale uses is appropriate to round off the year relating not only to South Africa but the urgency the world faces from Sudan to Palestine, escalating this year. There is only hope through the liberation of women, and in international working-class solidarity.

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

POSTER and PORTRAIT by Anastasya Eliseeva





LESSONS FROM UNIVERSITY WORKERS STRUGGLES IN SOUTH KOREA

Part one of a two-part series on the struggles of non-regular workers at university workplaces in Seoul, South Korea, from the late 2000s to early 2010s.

Terms

Non-regular work – used in the Korean labour movement to encompass temporary workers, outsourced workers and workers of special types

Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) – formed by radical unions that split from the historically conservative and reformist Federation of Korean Trade Unions

Korean Public & Social Services and Transport Workers' Union (KPTU) – KCTU affiliate

Seoul Public Service Branch (SPSB) – affiliated to KPTU as Seoul Local Branch

Yonsei Section – union of Yonsei University's non-regular workers, member of SPSB

Theoretical context

The ideal goal of the capitalist system is to maximize the "utility" of all economic subjects. However, since power resides in the hands of those who own the means of production (capital), maximizing utility is often appropriated and used as if it were the same as maximizing corporate profits.

The realistic option for corporations to achieve this is to categorize workers and organize power relations within them. Whereas the conflicts in traditional capitalism were based on the worker-capitalist class struggle, the modern capitalist economy fosters conflicts within the working class.

In the process of dividing the working class, capitalism appropriates political and social mechanisms to form a kind of "caste" within the working class. For example, in the U.S., the lowest level of work is reserved for 'middle-aged,' 'coloured,' and 'female' workers. In other words, generationalist, racist, and patriarchal gendered power is appropriated to divide the working class, concentrating the most powerless groups within those frames into low-wage, low job security, and poor working conditions.

Within these structures, female workers tend to be assigned to lower-level labour or are treated as "secondary" to male workers for the same work. In particular, 'care work', which is considered to be the domain of femininity in the gender structure, tends to be mostly performed by female workers, and as both cause and consequence, 'care work' is considered to be low-value work. The discrimination that women face in job selection, workplace discrimination, and the devaluation of "feminine labour" is not caused by the fact that they are female "workers," as some Marxists argue, or that they are "female" workers, as some feminists argue. It is because they are "female workers" at the bottom of an intersectional hierarchy.

Additionally, female workers are exploited, oppressed, and discriminated against in the workplace, while at the same time being expected to perform domestic and emotional labour at home. This is a result of "patriarchal capitalism," which recognizes men as workers (or masculinizes workers) and relegates women to a secondary labour reserve and is a dominant aspect of the gender hierarchy within capitalism, where men as a group exploit woman as a group.

The case of university cleaning/security workers in this article is a clear example of this structure. They are dedicated to the care work of 'cleaning work', and in the process, they are subjected to a complex structure of oppression as 'older', 'female', and 'irregular workers'.

This article discusses how they formed a trade union and worked as organized workers, and how they struggled to change the oppressive structures they faced.

Organizing student activists

The SPSB began organizing non-regular workers at Yonsei University by organizing student activists, with the following objectives.

1. To overcome the workers' McCarthyist and anti-communist rejection of unions (especially those affiliated with the KCTU). South Korea was under an ultra-conservative, anti-communist militarist regime until 1987. Older workers who had received primary and secondary education during that period inevitably had anti-communist feelings that led them to reject the "commies" of the KCTU, and many unions collapsed in the process. The SPSB attempted to overcome this initial rejection by making students, who were part of the university community and were living together daily, the face of the union organizing process.

2. Intentionally constructing an external organization that could counteract both the conservatization/legalization/compromissivism that is likely to occur as popular organizations on the ground stabilize, and the bureaucratization and deactivation that can occur as the union cadres at the 'top' become entrenched. Student activist organizations integrate into the daily activities of popular union units in the workplace, while promoting some radicalization of the mass organization with their own politics and maintaining

its militancy. At the same time, they criticize the bureaucratic laziness of the cadres and the lack of respect for the sensibilities of the masses on the ground.

3. Prospects for expanding the organization of locally based unions through student networks.

In organizing the Yonsei Section, the SPSB worked with the student collective SALMAT. It was not a student organization of a specific political faction, but rather an affinity group created by individual activists from different political factions in the student movement at Yonsei z. SALMAT was involved in the entire process of organizing, starting with building relationships with unorganized workers, and gained the initiative in the left-wing movement on campus through internal struggles between workers, SPSB, and students. Furthermore, it built a networked organization of students, uninfluenced by specific political factions in the Western Seoul region and became one of the main actors in the strategic organizing project for Western Seoul universities.

Workplace discontent

Before the union was organized, the objective working conditions of cleaning workers at Yonsei University could be summarized as: low wages far below the minimum wage, high labour intensity and widespread abusive labour practices. While forcing workers to do more extra work than contracted, the company paid only a basic salary of 690,000 won (approximately R9,200), far below the minimum wage of 773,200 won (R10,300) at the time, and withheld 350 million won (R466.5 million) in

wages over the past three years. The number of workers was continuously reduced in the name of 'management rationalization,' which inevitably led to higher labour intensity. Abusive labour practices such as ordering off-duty work and abusing power by intermediate managers continued.

In addition to these physical conditions, Yonsei's non-regular workers were subjected to gender-based oppression. The common use of the word 'ajumma' (a name that can be translated as Old Lady, which is spoken in a more derogatory tone), a word that is never neutral in value and inherently implies class and gender inferiority, as a common name, shows how the cleaning workers were perceived. The fact that professors, faculty, and managers were comfortable with the obviously 'socially unacceptable' act of verbally abusing elderly 'adults' in their 50s and 60s because the cleaning was not done to their liking can be attributed to the fact that they perceived the cleaning workers as 'ajummas' rather than 'workers'.

In addition to these derogatory names, there was also sexual violence against cleaning workers. Although the exact facts were not available due to the workers' reluctance to speak out, the union organizers were able to identify situations in which managers and faculty members sexually exploited their gender and class advantages, such as casually reciting obscene slurs.

SPSB, student activists, and disgruntled workers became the initial organizers of the Yonsei Section. The three parties met more and more frequently, and on January 26, 2008, the Yonsei Section was officially launched.





EDUCATIONAL SERIES: by Lucien van der Walt

THE INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL WORKERS UNION (ICU) AND THE BATTLE TO ORGANISE ACROSS SOUTHERN AFRICA

The ICU was founded in 1919 in Cape Town, and rapidly became a mass movement across southern Africa – not just South Africa.

One big union

The ICU was founded in 1919 in Cape Town, and rapidly became a mass movement across southern Africa – not just South Africa.

These days, unions are based in specific countries and linked through regional and global union federations. The ICU was very different. Its aim, spelled out at its 1920 congress, was to become One Big Union for workers "south of the Zambezi" river.

It grappled with an interlocked regional economy, dominated by South Africa and reliant on racist, labour-repressive systems. The regional working-class, black African, Coloured, Indian and white, included large migrant and immigrant layers. For example, almost one in two black workers on South Africa's goldmines were Mozambican; most black workers in Harare, Zimbabwe, were foreign-born.

The One Big Union was to unite all, everywhere. In 1920, the ICU was established in Namibia; in 1927, in Eswatini and Zimbabwe; in 1928, Lesotho; it even moved north of the Zambezi, established in Zambia, 1931.

Some sections were short-lived. Others proved more durable: Namibia and, especially, Zimbabwe. As late as 1955, the Reformed ICU was the leading protest movement in Harare, outliving the ICU in South Africa by a few years.

The ICU's regional nature requires that we must remember, not just ICU stalwarts in South Africa like Clements Kadalie and A.W.G. Champion, but also those active elsewhere, like William Adriaanse, Keable Mote, Joseph Kazembe, and Charles Mzingeli.

The union as political movement

Today, liberation history is written around political parties, like the ANC but the ICU was not the union wing of any party: it competed with parties. It was the main people's movement expressing current demands and future hopes.

At electrifying mass rallies, and in its press, ICU speakers demanded land redistribution, workers' control of production, women's rights, and the abolition of racism and colonialism – it sometimes spoke of a revolutionary general strike to remake society.

Unlike nationalist and left parties, the ICU did not set its sights on state power. It spoke of workers and the union directly taking over farms, factories, mines, and workshops.

The ICU never confined itself to collective bargaining, servicing members, or the workplace – if anything, it neglected such work. It organised in townships, including among women traders. No other union in the region has recruited as many farmworkers. It also drew in legions of small black farmers, including tenants on white-owned land.

With perhaps 150,000 members in South Africa, and active in seven countries, the ICU terrified governments. It helped forge an insurgent, popular, working-class counter-public and identity. And it overshadowed parties like the SA Communist Party (at 3,000 members in 1929), the ANC (under 4,000 before the 1940s), not to mention groups like Zimbabwe's Bantu Voters Association.

The ICU's politics

The ICU was not politically monolithic: no union can be.

ICU politics were an especially unstable mixture, drawing on Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism, Christianity, liberalism, and revolutionary syndicalism. Some SACP writers have suggested that the ICU derived its anti-capitalism from Marxism – and that the ICU turned sharply rightwards after 1926, when Kadalie expelled communists. But the ICU must be understood on its own terms, as something unique. Its anti-capitalist, class politics came from many sources, not only Marxism.

The vision of a revolutionary general strike, and of workers and One Big Union – not the state – directly taking over means of production, came from revolutionary syndicalism. This anti-parliamentary, anti-party, anti-state outlook traces back, not to Karl Marx, but his anarchist rival, Mikhail Bakunin.

Nor is the ICU's evolution from 1926 accurately captured by the claim of a rightwards shift. The union drew closer to the social democrats, on the left. In 1926, too, its executive resolved on a general strike against new racist Bills. The 1927 congress reaffirmed this thinking. It remained so commonplace that many members believed that the ICU would seize white-owned farms on Christmas Day that year.

Promise and weakness

The shifting mixture of ideas gave the ICU great flexibility. However, it was never translated into a coherent framework or concrete programme. The union's positions shifted; its messaging fluctuated wildly. The ICU also operated in the context of sustained economic crisis, which accelerated with the 1929 Great Depression. Small black farmers were, meanwhile, under siege from growing restrictions on renting and buying land.

The divided workers

ICU structures were flimsy, limited popular participation and control, and were abused by ambitious leaders like Kadalie and Champion and it struggled to forge workers' unity.

Contrary to nationalist myths, most whites were working-class: in fact, white workers founded the first unions, engaged in militant strikes; they were the core of the early SACP. But many white workers feared – correctly – that white employers would happily replace them with cheaper workers with fewer rights, from the other races.

Local syndicalists and communists argued that the solution lay in "levelling up": equal rights and equal wages for all, driven by united unions. But most white-based unions opted, instead, for protection through job colour bars, locking other workers out of specific jobs and labour markets.

When the ICU sought to join the mainly white SA Trade Union Congress, it was rejected and had more initial success in uniting black and Coloured workers, as well as black workers from different countries. Kadalie himself, his biographer Henry Dee shows, often argued for "levelling up" – but across the whole region.

But Coloured workers, central to the early ICU, had largely left by the late 1920s. Few Indians ever joined.



ICU Workers' Hall: from Labour History Group, 1981, The ICU, Labour History Group: Cape Town.

Many ICU speakers indulged in a narrow nationalism that reflected – and reinforced – this narrowing base and had elements of national-populism.

Race, nation, class

While people, ideas, and movements flowed across borders, this usually in distinct ethnic, national, and racial channels. There were also strong anti-immigrant and "tribalistic" sentiments amongst black workers across the region, as well as riots.

Loud voices in the ICU in South Africa, for example, demanded restrictions on immigration and priority for local blacks. Champion, went even further, moving into Zulu nationalist (and anti-Indian) sentiments.

Immigration and cheap labour

Calls for closed labour markets and reserved jobs were, clearly, not unique to the white-based unions. We must be careful not to dismiss this labour-protectionist politics using psychological explanations, as merely "prejudice" and "xenophobia."

Workers in the region were locked in competition for jobs and resources, often against cheaper labour, often of a different ethnic, national and / or racial background. For example, foreign black workers were often preferred by employers. Unions, the ICU included, were relatively weak, and did not inspire confidence that any general "levelling up" was possible.

The limits of ICU counter-power

The ICU had little capacity or scope to win gains or keep its promises. Thundering demands existed alongside mild daily activities, like lobbying authorities, court cases, and business and land purchase schemes. Hopes for reform co-existed uneasily alongside a vision of revolution from below at some future stage.

While truly remarkable in its regional vision and promotion of solidarity across borders, the ICU proved unable to back this with joint action. For example, there was no system to coordinate sections in different countries. It made sense to many workers, of all races and nationalities, that unions try to set up boundaries, and appeal to states to block the entry of other, cheaper workers

into specific labour markets, jobs, and territories.

But in this way, workers and unions entrenched divisions in the working-class.

An important legacy

The ICU is worth remembering, despite its failures. First, for its pioneering effort at globalisation-from-below, its cross-border vision, and its spectacular growth, including rural organising. Second, for its model: not reliance on parties and government, but on popular mobilisation, and workers' control of the economy.

Professor Lucien van der Walt, author and worker educator, is director of the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU), Rhodes University.



Charles Mzingeli, speaking at ICU meeting, Harare, Zimbabwe: from Brian Raftopoulos and Ian Phimister (eds), 1997, *Keep on Knocking: A History of the Labour Movement in Zimbabwe, 1900-97*, Baobab Books for Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Harare.



FROM THE ILRIG RESOURCE CENTRE

by Anastasya Eliseeva

ILRIG 21ST POLITICAL SCHOOL QUESTIONING DEMOCRACY

Reclaim The City (RTC), Housing Assembly, Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX), Khayelitsha Labour Media Forum (LCMF), The Immigrant and Refugee chronicles, Equal Education, the Matzikama community, Witzenberg Justice Coalition (WJC), Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU), Intlungu YaseMatyotyombeni (IYM), Quando Quando occupation activists, Support Centre for Land Change (SCLC), People's Health Movement (PHM) and Maskana Civil Society attended ILRIG'S annual Political School in Cape Town, (21st-25th October) after the Johannesburg one in September.

The schools main aim is to enhance popular political education with a strong feminist accent and facilitate movement building and organizing within and between activist formations, based on progressive values and solidarity.

"Democracy Now?" was the theme discussed and integrated this year, in all its forms. The event kicked off with an Introduction round, where organisations displayed their material - plackards, posters and speeches. It was followed by a discussion and Q&A session, allowing attendees to engage with one another on the issues they face and the ways they organize within their communities.

Over the next three days, participants interacted with the core themes of the event, aimed to facilitate deeper understanding and dialogue on how to build struggles based on participatory, people-centred democracy. One of the highlights was a presentation by the Simunye Workers Forum (SWF), a radical grassroots trade union rooted in a community-based advice office. They shared their non-hierarchical, feminist, democratic approach to organizing and reflected on their successes in advancing workers' rights.

The programme continued with other engaging activities like film screenings, games and interactive debate exercises.

It was evident during the feedback session on the last day that the school succeeded in what it set out to do: build meaningful connections in local activism, offer a space for learning and discussing ideas to empower organisations in their struggles and beyond.



Participants on the last day of the school
Photographs: Anastasya



Workshops at ILRIG political school
Photographs: Anastasya

ORDER YOUR FIRE 2025 FEMINIST INTERNATIONAL RADICAL EMANCIPATION

In ILRIG style, 2024 saw the publishing and distribution of 2 new books. The history of water privatization, a formidable publication, by ILRIG's Dale McKinley and our collection of articles in the 40th anniversary book- taken from presentations made at the festival held last year, in our 40th year, with forward by ILRIG's Shawn Hattingh.

We also have many powerful popular education t-shirts and posters to share as well, produced this year for our political schools and platforms and some to be reproduced.

Next year, look forward to our popular 2025 Calendar, with a feminist international theme, with contributions from South African and international artists and movements. Researched and curated by ILRIG's Lara Reddy and Anastasya Eliseeva on Art and Design, it will fire up your feminist popular knowledge, as well as keep you motivated next year in our struggle for women and queer liberation.

Order from our website or through staff - or collect from the Cape Town/Johannesburg office.



ORDER NOW





OUR STRUGGLE

by Nicolas Dieltiens

CRISIS OF UNPAID BENEFITS CONFERENCE PLANS COLLECTIVE ACTION TO RECOVER STOLEN PENSIONS

The conference on The Crisis of Unpaid Benefits: Cause, consequence and correction convened at the Airport Boutique Hotel from 4-6 October 2024 in the armpit between the airport and Main Reef Road in Boksburg. It was the first national conference on the issue of unpaid benefits, organised by the Unpaid Benefits Campaign (UBC).

The UBC has grown since its launch in 2017, its tactics moving from confrontation and protest to meeting with fund administrators and even with the government regulator, the Financial Services Conduct Authority. The conference was proposed as an opportunity to bring stakeholders together, to discuss the problem of unpaid benefits and to face up to the fact that not nearly enough is being done by those in power to solve it. It is a crisis that looks set to deepen as records and memories fade with the passage of time. The older we get, the struggle for what is rightfully owed becomes as much a fight for memory as it is for justice.

Who came, who didn't

Delegates came from the five branches of the UBC, from Sebokeng, Soweto, Sharpeville, Orange Farm and Ekurhuleni. Representatives of ex-worker groups in Cape Town, Klerksdorp, Primrose in Johannesburg and Sekhukhune in Limpopo, as well as of the Assembly of the Unemployed and Mining Affected Communities United in Action attended. The union federations disappointed the invitation with only SAFTU in attendance, in the person of their new national spokesperson, Newton Masuku. See an outtake of his presentation [here](#).

The conference was not meant to be a talkshop among allies and the UBC tried to interest fund administrators to attend – an opportunity to be part of the solution to the crisis of unpaid benefits you'd think they would not want to pass. But they did. Except for Liberty Life, which after the UBC marched on the administrator in 2017, has been most open to engaging with the campaign.

The FSCA was represented at the conference by Soyaphi Khoza, a divisional head who could not discuss the specifics of fund cancellations or any potential repercussions for administrators who had knowingly failed to fulfil their obligations to members – or any of the more pointed questions put to him. The UBC has developed a working relationship with the FSCA after a change of leadership thawed the regulator's initial frostiness, and this year, it has actively supported four roadshows organised by UBC branches. But, as Mr Khoza was to learn, delegates were not disarmed by the FSCA's recent friendliness.

Regrettably, the departments of finance, labour, social development, and the South African Revenue Service (SARS) did not respond to invitations to attend the conference, highlighting a concerning disconnect between governmental bodies and the pressing issues faced by beneficiaries. The sole government representative to respond positively was Dr Weitz Botes from the Office of the Compensation Commissioner within the Department of Health. With an ease on the mic and a clerical demeanour, Dr Botes presented the innovative solutions his office has developed to trace former mineworkers suffering from occupational diseases. Throughout the conference, he took the time to assist delegates with personal inquiries, offering guidance on how to tie 'unclaimed' benefits to their rightful beneficiaries and he earned much respect.



Photograph supplied by UBC

Causes of the crisis

The conference opened with a panel of pension lawyers with a brief to discuss the causes of the crisis. Lax regulation, they agreed, allowed administrators to prioritise their own interests over those of the members they are meant to serve. Their principles of good faith and proper care for fund members have only ever been on paper and not practised. Hannine Drake of Pension Justice accused asset managers and administrators of contributing to the ongoing crisis of unpaid benefits by avoiding beneficiaries. Alexander Forbes, for one, was found to have invested members' funds for secret profits, while Liberty appointed one of its own employees to act as a trustee for 500 funds to cue their deregistration at the time that the regulator was cancelling thousands of funds that still had assets. Rather than trying to solve the billions in unpaid benefits, their approach seemed to treat the situation as an opportunity for profit.

Rosemary Hunter (former deputy registrar of pension funds at the FSCA and UBC ally) reflected on her own experiences, stating, "I lost the Constitutional Court case. Administrators weren't ordered to reinstate funds, so they haven't bothered." While both Alexander Forbes and Liberty have applied for the reinstatement of a few funds, the majority remain unregistered, leaving their assets inaccessible to members.

Open Secrets's Ariella Scher made the case that administrators and the FSCA are moved to act only when pressured to do so. Her example was the case that the UBC and Open Secrets (OS) filed against the FSCA in 2021, which called for the FSCA to compel administrators to take more effective steps in tracing beneficiaries. While the case was settled out of court, it effectively prompted the FSCA to do its job, and tripled the number of funds Liberty sought to re-register.

Consequences

Day two of the conference handed the stage to the branches of the UBC. Sello Mokoena from the Sharpeville branch spoke about the challenges activists have had to face trying to assist beneficiaries. UBC activists frequently are snubbed by fund administrators as a 'third party' with no authorisation to represent beneficiaries. The FSCA, he demanded, had to ensure that administrators allow for UBC representation. Their reluctance, he alleged, was a result of the influence of politicians as shareholders in these fund administrators. Mokoena also pointed out the troubling silence of unions regarding the failures of businesses to pay workers their dues. The very fact the UBC is made up of retired workers is a clear indication of the unions' failure to protect their members. Could their failure be linked to union investment companies and their stakes in pension funds? It was a question put to the first day's panel, but not explored in any depth. Ariella Scher observed that union investment companies have made some union leaders very wealthy.

Bruce Kabi of Soweto UBC echoed Mokoena's sentiments, advocating for a more radical approach: "We're talking about money that belongs to the masses. We can't be begging for help." He recalled the campaign's encounters with scammers, whose business the campaign undermined by helping people without charge: "Who are you to ask people for money!?" he challenged. The pool of unpaid benefits is unfortunately teeming with scammers from whom the UBC has to distinguish itself.

Have the branches tried to win more local support? Mxolisi Ngcayayi from Soweto UBC said they have good relations with local councillors and have tried to involve them in roadshows and public events. But the biggest obstacle to building support in the township is the lack of offices, a permanent base to build relationships from and house the organisation. It is the frustration of many UBC activists that they have to work out of their homes and without the tools to develop a system to manage the hundreds of cases.

Hannine Drake presented twice, on the second panel, alongside Dr Botes, discussing what prospects via the courts there are to fix the crisis.

Fixing the crisis: a way forward

The final day of the conference was given to charting a path forward: new strategies to tackle fund administrators, and new ways to push the FSCA to act against them, and new tools and partnerships to build the campaign.

The UBC plans to develop a database with the assistance of Dr Botes to inform the campaign's engagements with fund administrators and the FSCA. Such an administrative system will allow the UBC to build a case calling for greater transparency and accountability from them, while activists fighting the day-to-day struggle will better be able to track claims. The campaign will also be broadening its focus on what benefits are unpaid. The recently implemented 'two-pot' pension system, for instance, has revealed the many employers failing to pay their employee pension contributions. Collaboration with OS, Pension Justice and SAFTU will strengthen collective efforts in holding such companies accountable for their crimes.

To build the organisation, the UBC plans to develop a website, produce media, and form an outreach task team. Before covid disrupted everyone's lives, there were branches of the UBC forming in various regions and the campaign will be returning to this important groundwork, all the while wary of the scammers who may want to impersonate the UBC. And, an inspired speaker urged, the UBC's work needs to articulate with broader social struggles, such as climate change and health. As the conversation around unpaid benefits continues, it is clear that collective action and persistent advocacy will depend on how relevant the campaign makes itself to justice in all respects

We Have Fed You All for a Thousand Years

By an Unknown Proletarian

We have fed you all, for a thousand years
And you hail us still unfed,
Though there's never a dollar of all your wealth
But marks the worker's dead.
We have yielded our best to give you rest
And you lie on crimson wool.
Then if blood be the price of all your wealth,
Good God! We have paid it in full.

There is never a mine blown skyward now
But we're buried alive for you.
There's never a wreck drifts shoreward now
But we are its ghastly crew.
Go reckon our dead by the forges red
And the factories where we spin.
If blood be the price of your cursed wealth
Good God! We have paid it in.

We have fed you all for a thousand years—
For that was our doom, you know,
From the days when you chained us in your fields
To the strike of a week ago.
You have taken our lives, and our babies and wives,
And we're told it's your legal share;
But if blood be the price of your lawful wealth
Good God! We have bought it fair.

But My Chains

By Kyle Dargan

Load audio player

But my loyalty
points—my purchasing
power. Nothing.

But my economies
of scale, my digital
compression: companionship.

But my all-
you-can-eat
loneliness, my rail-
rapid integration.

But my market-
driven love
handles, my accrued
vacancy.

But my taste
in artisanal
bootstrapism.

But my choice
of protein, of pit-baked
avarice, of indulgences.
[CHURCH collects
as does CAESAR.]

But my supply
side floods, my O'
so buoyant home
staked and sandbagged
on striving's pebbly shore.

But my internal
combustion, my miles,
my carcinogenic
Kingdom Come. Nothing.

But my fast casual
history—every morsel
wrapped in a bank
notes' blood-sketched
hagiography.

But my user-friendly
righteousness, my Gross
Domestic Amnesia.
In place of the old wants ...
we finds new wants.

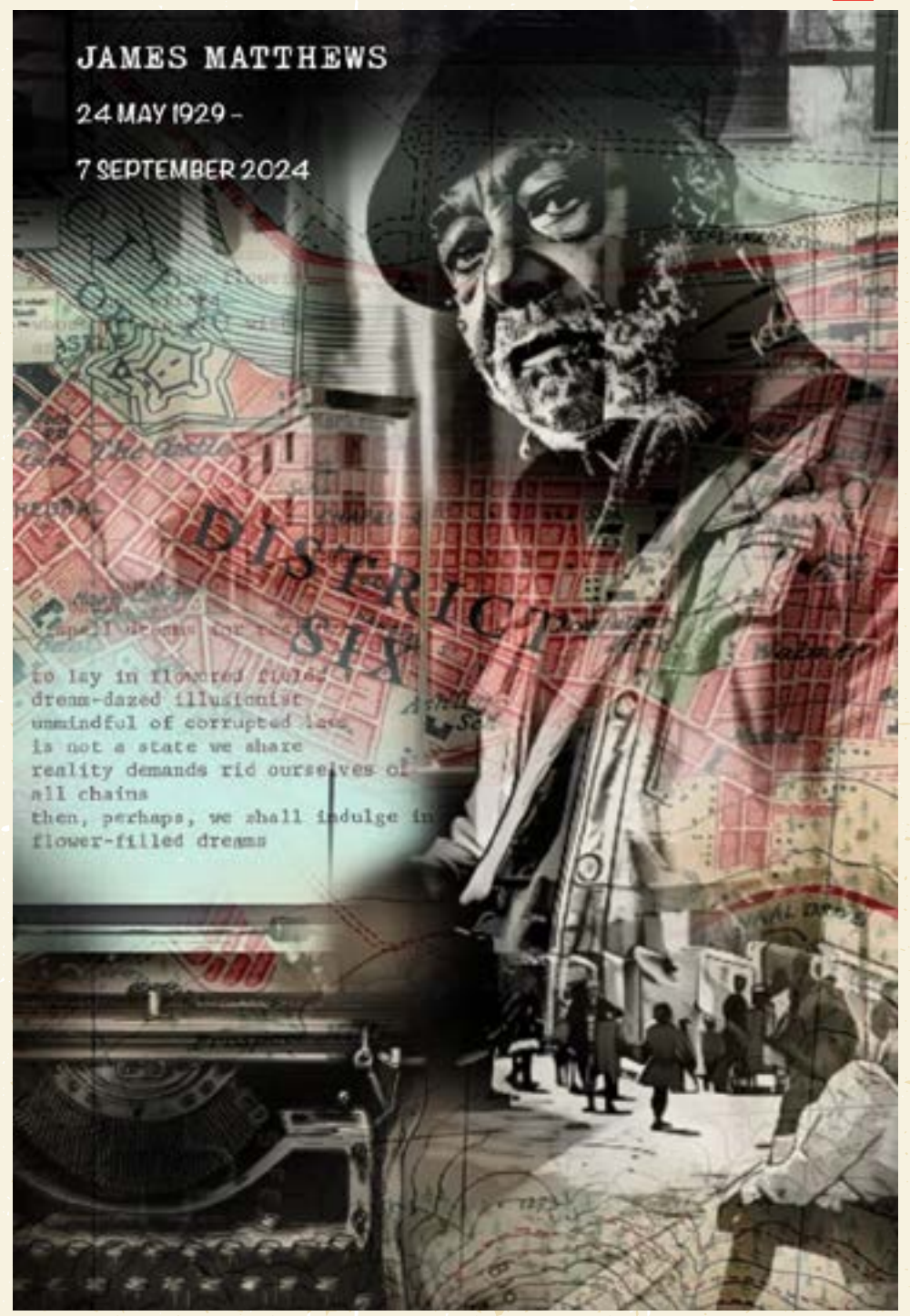
But my comfort,
my tariffed aches,
my engorged
prerogatives. I made
this money,
you didn't. Right, Ted?

But my ability to believe
that what I've paid for,
I have made. Nothing
to lose, except ownership
of this wallet-sized tomb—
these six crisp walls.

2018 by Kyle Dargan. Originally published in
Poem-a-Day on August 24, 2018, by the Academy of
American Poets.

"Conceptually, the poem is an artistic byproduct of
my current pining for an actual anti-capitalist, anti-
consumerist existence (the title and refrain here
being adapted from the closing of the Communist
Manifesto). Figuratively and literally, how different,
disorienting, or necessarily painful would that life be
compared to my now? (Or not?) No answers here—
not that I write poems to 'answer'—but challenges to
some popular and personal assumptions."

—Kyle Dargan



James Matthews, OIS (24 May 1929 – 7 September 2024) was a South African poet, writer and publisher. His was one of the last great voices of an era of writers who worked against South Africa's repressive and racist system of apartheid, which resulted in him being relentlessly harassed, detained by police and his work banned.

Illustration by Anastasya Eliseeva, inspired by a quote from the poem "Flames & flowers" by James Matthews

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

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

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



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Design: Design for Development / Daniel Rautenbach
Layout/illustration: Anastasya Eliseeva Printed by Fingerprint Co-operative Ltd

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