

FROM ILRIG RESOURCE CENTRE By Singisa Mdungwana and Lucien van der Walt

THE VUYISILE MINI WORKERS SCHOOLS AND NEIL AGGETT LABOUR STUDIES LECTURES



In November 2025, the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU) at Rhodes University in Eastern Cape, South Africa, wrapped up another week-long Vuyisile Mini Workers School in Makhanda. The schools are named in honour of a legend of the South African liberation movement. Born in 1920 in Tsomo (EC), Vuyisile Mini was a prominent anti-apartheid and trade union activist in Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth), executed in 1964 for activities in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK).

The Vuyisile Mini Workers Schools focus on building the capacity of workplace-based workers' organisations – especially (but not only) trade unions, in the Eastern Cape. As with other components of NALSU's worker education, the Vuyisile Mini Workers Schools are non-sectarian, non-aligned, and open to different views and constructive debate, rather than on narrow education or sloganeering.

NALSU works with all the main union federations and bodies, as well as with other working-class movements. The 2025 event was opened by Mr Mini, eldest son of Vuyisile Mini, reminding everyone of the human stories that underpin labour struggles. Attendees came from all the main union federations, COSATU, FEDUSA, NACTU and SAFTU,

the Phakamani Siyephambili ("Stand Up and Move Forward") movement of farmworkers and farm-dwellers, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM), and the Independent Khomani Residents Association (iKORA). It is partnered with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), South Africa.

The 2025 School focused on "Can the Centre Hold? Prospects for South African Economic Revival in a Changing World Order," looking at issues like the economy at thirty years of parliamentary democracy, global shifts ranging like the rise of protectionism and Net Zero, a review and assessment of key current South African government (including GNU) policies and those proposed by working-class movements.

The programme was built around a series of academic and worker-activist inputs and group activities, structured to facilitate the development of skills in critical thinking and evaluation.

Day one saw presentations from the house lead into NALSU's Prof Mike Rogan's conversation on mapping the South African economy today, and the Global Labour University's (GLU) and NALSU's Warren McGregor followed with the new government's GAIN policy, opening a lively debate. Day two presentations were by Mike, evaluating South African state industrial policy, followed by Prof Lucien van der Walt, who unpacked union of policy proposals. Dr Sandie Phakathi of Rhodes zoomed in discussing state agricultural policy. On day three, Dr Nwabisa Malimba (Rhodes) joined us for the morning session, tackling South African government trade policy; NALSU's Prof Gilton Klerck spoke on South African state labour market



policy and law; Mr Siphelele Ngidi from Wits led conversations on government's policies for the informal sector.

Day four was especially vibrant and energising. We began with an engaging session by NALSU's Siviwe Mhlana, who unpacked the intersections between gender issues, justice, and energy policy. The momentum carried through as comrade Dinga Sikwebu, stalwart of the labour movement, led an insightful, lively, and eye-opening discussion on electricity policy, ESKOM, and labour movement strategy.

The events of the day culminated in Dinga Sikwebu's public Neil Aggett Labour Studies Lecture. The venue at the Graham Hotel was packed with trade unionists and people from this university in Makhanda, its local communities, and movements. Scores joined online as well. His topic was "COSATU@40: Decades of Political Alignment and Entanglement." He interrogated COSATU's evolution from its initial position that unions should be political but independent, to the 1990s embrace of, and entanglement in, the Tripartite Alliance and the state.

Crucially, Dinga argued, it was important to re-evaluate the notions that unions are essentially economic, sectional, and limited, which underlies strategies of aligning with parties. It was a thought-provoking session, with a lively Q&A, and left a lasting impact. His talk was another milestone in the annual Neil Aggett Labour Studies Lecture, hosted by NALSU: the Lecture, like NALSU itself, is named in honour of Dr Neil Hudson Aggett, a union organiser and medical doctor who died in 1982 in an apartheid jail after enduring brutality and torture. The Lecture is partnered with the Vuyisile Mini Workers School and focused on working-class audiences.

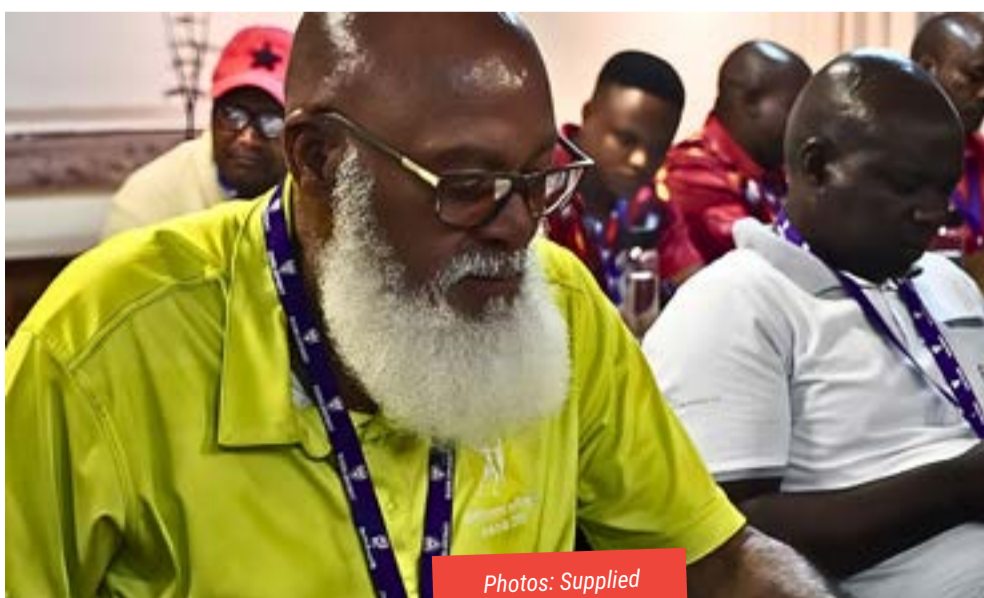
Another proud moment followed with the graduation ceremony. Participants were celebrated

for their commitment, and engagement throughout the programme. This uplifting ceremony added a sense of achievement and community spirit to the day. And it showed that the Vuyisile Mini Workers School is serious about fostering critical thinking, learning, engagement and non-sectarianism. And that spirit of excitement and engagement was carried through into the last day's sessions on taking labour forward, not so much with slogans or grand plans, but the very concrete challenge of, as one participant put it, "What can we do on Monday?"

The conversations, insights, and energy, from the programme continue to resonate deeply. Looking back, the 2025 Vuyisile Mini Workers School was an unforgettable experience filled with deep learning and provoking conversations. The programme created space to critically engage with South Africa's economic landscape, worker rights, union strategies, and the evolving challenges facing the labour movement. The NALSU team extends its heartfelt gratitude to the impeccable Graham Hotel, to our funders, to our partners from working-class movements to our university community, the Mini and Aggett families. Collective dialogue, worker education, and spaces that nurture critical thinking and solidarity, matter.

Based in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU) at Rhodes University is engaged in policy, research, and workers' education, has a democratic, non-sectarian, non-aligned, and pluralist practice, and active relations with a range of advocacy, labour, and research organisations. We draw strength from our location in a province where the legacy of apartheid and the cheap labour system, and post-apartheid contradictions, are keenly felt.

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