Amandla!

South Africa's progressive magazine standing for social justice.

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They rose so we dare rise again

50 years of the '76 uprising

***Amandla!* June 16 competition: #TheChangeIWantToSee** / Che Guevara / **China in the driver's seat**

NEW EDITION

The Soweto Uprising:

The birth of a national students' movement

A Jacana Pocket History

Noor Nieftagodien

The 1976 student uprising was a major turning point in South Africa's history. On the 16th of June 1976 thousands of students in Soweto marched peacefully to demand the scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Police violence, which resulted in numerous deaths, caused protesters to turn their anger against the entire apartheid system. Soon after the historic demonstration in Soweto, the rebellion spread to other parts of the country, making it the first national school students' protest movement in the country's history.

This revised edition of *The Soweto Uprising* examines the underlying causes and the immediate factors that led to this watershed movement. It explains the crucial role of Black Consciousness ideology and the emergence of school students as major actors in the liberation struggle. The important role of women is highlighted and the rebellion is placed in the context of African-wide students struggles and anti-colonial movements.

The book considers how the nascent school-based organisations shaped the character and form of the revolt, including in building alliances with workers. The production of new forms of emancipatory politics had a significant impact on the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s. This short history explains the uprising and its aftermath from the perspective of its main participants, the students, by drawing on a rich body of oral histories and groundbreaking research by scholars and postgraduate students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noor Nieftagodien is the Head of the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand. He has authored and co-edited books on histories of Alexandra, Ekurhuleni and Kathorus, Orlando West, the Soweto Uprising, student politics, the African National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union. His numerous published articles and book chapters have focused on aspects of popular insurgent struggles, public history, youth politics and local history. He is currently researching the history of the Congress of South African Students. Nieftagodien serves on the boards of the South African History Archives (SAHA), the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC) and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI), as well as of the journals, *African Studies*, *Sources*, *Africa Perspectives* and the activist magazine, *Amandla!* He leads several public history projects, including the Soweto History and Archives Project, the Non-Racial Sports History Project and the development of activist archives.

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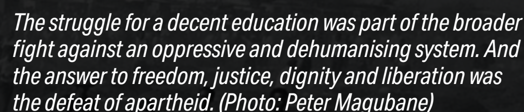


The struggle for a decent education was part of the broader fight against an oppressive and dehumanising system. And the answer to freedom, justice, dignity and liberation was the defeat of apartheid. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

1976 ... 2026

THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE FOR EDUCATION

Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.
Frantz Fanon

ON JUNE 16 1976, BLACK students in Soweto organised to stay out of school and take to the streets because of the apartheid government's imposition of Bantu Education and Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. That day reverberated across the country throughout the ongoing months of 1976. But the actions of students of 1976 did not end that year; they ignited a wave of resistance that helped transform the fight for liberation.

At the time, all political organisations were banned, after the Sharpville massacre. Movements and organisations were forced underground. There were increasing levels of violence and suppression and politically people felt weak.

The South African economy was declining, with high levels of inflation and unemployment. There was not enough space and there were not enough services and facilities for the growing urban population. In Soweto and other communities, this led to frustration and anger as the living standards of residents declined substantially.

The future for Black high school students looked hopeless. Not only were 'Black' schools over-crowded and under-resourced but many students were not receiving an education at all. Afrikaans had been introduced as a medium of instruction and many teachers were not able to teach in it. But most striking was that Bantu education was not to support Black students to become doctors, teachers, or lawyers. It was to ensure that they would make up the next layer of Black workers.

The struggle for a decent education was part of the broader fight against an oppressive and dehumanising system. And the answer to freedom, justice, dignity and liberation was the defeat of apartheid.

Not only were young people organising and mobilising against the apartheid system, but they were shaping a political ideology. Young people like Tsietsi Mashinini, Sibongile Mkhabela, Seth Mazibuko, Steve Biko, Onkgopotse Tiro and others were inspired by the politics of Black Consciousness (BC). BC placed the raising of political consciousness at the centre of liberation. It sought to help the oppressed masses to understand the reasons for their oppression; to develop the consciousness needed to counter the destructive psychology of racism; and to resist the destructive, limiting curriculum and pedagogy of Bantu Education and Bush Colleges. This consciousness would free the black majority from the chains that confined them as servants to white society.

Today, the 1976 uprising that started in Soweto and spread throughout South Africa is commemorated on June 16 as a public holiday—Youth Day. As a result, in many ways it has lost its significance, acting more as a symbol than an embodiment of a politics of resistance. It has put us into a state of historical amnesia.

And that amnesia allows for the scapegoating of fellow Africans for the failures of the South African elite. Ironically, solidarity and internationalism were a core part of the consciousness of the 1976 generation of activists. Today, we witness its polar opposite—children being hounded out of school because they are 'foreigners'. And the governing elite energises these attacks because they divert attention from its own failure to deliver on the promises and dreams of the 1976 generation.

If we are serious about honouring the students of '76, we must look unflinchingly at what South African youth face today.

The classroom

Fifty years after the students of 1976 marched for the right to a dignified education, the achievement of that right remains grotesquely unequal. The overcrowded primary school classroom is where it starts, at the desk where a hungry child is expected to learn.

The scale of overcrowding in South African schools is a deformation of learning itself. More than 8,200 schools nationally are overcrowded; and this number is skewed, as usual, along racial and class lines. The Department of Basic Education has estimated it would cost R32 billion to fix this crisis—a figure the state has no credible plan to raise. In Gauteng, enrolment has more than doubled from 1995 to 2026, and yet infrastructure has failed to keep pace. This leaves a shortage of roughly 5,500 classrooms. Classrooms run with 60 to 70 pupils per teacher in township and inner-city schools. In the Eastern Cape, community members have turned to the courts as class numbers routinely exceed 80, sometimes even surpassing 100. South Africa's national learner-educator ratio stands at 33:1; the OECD average is 16:1. Beyond the difficulty of trying to learn in these conditions, overcrowding also raises questions of sanitation and, in turn, dignity.

The government is cutting teachers, gutting the education workforce at precisely the moment it needssss to expand. More than 23,000 education posts were cut in a single financial year, nearly 5% of the public education workforce. In the Western Cape alone, 2,407 contract teacher posts were eliminated due to a R3.8 billion budget shortfall, the result of the National government funding only 64% of a nationally negotiated wage agreement. Minister of Basic Education, Siviwe Gwarube, has projected that seven of nine provinces will be unable to afford their education budgets by 2028.

Then, there is the hunger. Approximately 9.7 million children from indigent households depend on the National School Nutrition Programme for a daily meal; for many, this is the only reliable meal of the day. More than a third of enrolled learners come from households existing below the poverty line; the Child Support Grant falls short of the monthly cost of a basic nutritious diet for a child. A child who arrives at school hungry cannot learn. A child who cannot learn is already being shaped by a system indifferent to their survival.

And then there are the children who are not in school at all. Four in ten learners who enrol in Grade 1 exit the system before matriculating. Financial pressure, teen pregnancy (often as the result of statutory rape), family caretaking responsibilities, and the simple exhaustion of poverty drive them out. The dropout rate sharpens in the senior phases. Over 60% of young people aged 15–24 are unemployed. And the connection is direct: leaving school early is both the product of poverty and a near guarantor of it.

Structurally, the problem compounds. 74% of South African schools have no libraries, 83% have no laboratories, and only one in three schools has a computer centre. In rural communities, children still learn in conditions that would scandalise the parents of the Sandton schools whose matric results anchor the national average upwards.

Our schools cannot be measured by matric pass rates. They are measured by the 70 children in the primary school classroom, with one teacher, no library and the starving children in the front row.

The university that remains out of reach

For those who do survive the school system and dare to imagine university, the terrain beyond the school gates is no less treacherous. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme, an institution meant to make higher education accessible, is in structural collapse. NSFAS faces a nearly R14 billion funding shortfall that threatens to exclude over 100,000 eligible students from support in 2026.

These are students who have overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers, once more made victims of circumstances beyond their control. In 2024, over 600,000 students were unable to receive their graduation certificates due to unpaid fees. They studied, graduated, and then found their qualifications held hostage by a debt the state helped to create. Many students received either partial allowances or went months without any allowance at all. This makes it nearly impossible to buy food or pay rent, let alone focus on an academic career.

The cycle has become deeply predictable. A surging demand coupled with inadequate resources leads to yearly exclusion; protests follow; some are allowed to register but most are left behind.

A proper tribute to 1976

An honest tribute to 1976 is not a march to a monument. It is a serious, funded, politically courageous commitment to the education system. A commitment to infrastructure, to school meals, to a solvent NSFAS, to an economic policy oriented towards youth employment. A commitment to an emancipatory world outside of the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal system that has entrenched poverty, inequality, oppression, exploitation and violence.

But it is not just the situation in schools that is against us as young people; our society in general is in crisis. The deepest levels of poverty, inequality and violence impact the majority of working class people in South Africa. Every day, people are hungry; in fact 63% of people living in South Africa are hungry. This would make fertile ground for organising, building a movement and revolt. But it seems that we have to go back to the tasks that SASO pointed out in the development of Black Consciousness — how do we rebuild consciousness towards action in our schools, in our workplaces and in our communities? This is our generational mission.

Fifty years after the students of 1976 marched for the right to a dignified education, the achievement of that right remains grotesquely unequal. The overcrowded primary school classroom is where it starts, at the desk where a hungry child is expected to learn. (Photo: Manqulo Nyakombi/GroundUp)

news briefs

PIE Act Amendment Bill

Sometimes there is a clear line drawn in the sand. The proposed amendment to the PIE Act is such a line. And it puts the entire GNU on precisely the wrong side of it.

You would think that those who have presided over such a catastrophic failure to provide housing for the homeless would experience some remorse—some shame even. Apparently not. Nearly 5 million people live in informal settlements, and what is their response? Make it a crime to "incite, arrange, organise or permit a person to occupy land without the consent of the owner or person in charge of the land".

The government has demonstrated its utter failure to even scratch the surface of the housing problem in over 30 years. But it wants to criminalise people for organising housing for themselves. There are more poor people now in South Africa than there were in 1994. In effect, they have made poverty worse and now they are threatening to make criminals of the poor.

And for what good purpose are they planning to criminalise the poor? Why of course to protect the sanctity of the rights of property owners. There is no clearer class divide than that. Defending property rights against the homeless. That is what this Bill does. And if anything is to incite a mass movement of protest, this should.

SAFTU has condemned the Bill, calling it "a dangerous, regressive and unconstitutional attack on the working class and the poor". But Cosatu? The SACP? Silence. Either they have failed to notice this frontal attack on the working class, or they are too compromised by their membership of the Tripartite Alliance to open their mouths.

US wars for capital

Insofar as there is any coherent statement about the purpose of the US attacking Iran, it is to save the world from the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon. The US always finds a narrative for its imperialist escapades. But it is not so often that one of its most decorated soldiers strips away the story and unveils the true objective.

Major General Smedley Butler, who died in 1940, was an exception. It's worth quoting what he had to say and wondering what he would have added had he been active at the time of the latest adventure:

> *I spent 33 years and 4 months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism.*
>
> *I helped make Mexico, and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in. I helped the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street.*
>
> *I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902-1912. I helped make Honduras for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested."*

Here is our attempt at a 'Butler' take on the Iran war:

> *I helped sustain the profits of the oil speculators, arms dealers, sanctions lawyers, and security contractors, and sent the bill to the poor of the world.*

And we don't have to look far for the evidence. The UK Guardian newspaper reported that Powerus, a company backed by Donald Trump's two oldest sons, is trying to sell drones to the Gulf states while they're under attack from Iran, in retaliation for their father's onslaught. These guys are not just arms dealers. They're family. So which is the mafia state now?

Is the ANC right for once?

It is very rare that you will find that the pages of this magazine have anything good to say about the ANC. We have consistently explained how it has resourced a predatory elite at the expense of the working class and the poor. But on this one occasion we can hardly fault them, and Fikile Mbalula can have quite a pithy way of expressing himself. Here he is on the Conference of the Left:

> *We say openly to our country: the African National Congress does not consider this convening to be a Conference of the Left. The composition is itself the political argument. A gathering that proposes to sit chambers of commerce alongside the Bolshevik Party, the uMkhonto weSizwe Party alongside AZAPO, business formations alongside trade unions, is not a left formation in any received meaning of the term.*

Israel's apartheid reinforced

On 30 March the Israeli parliament passed the *Death Penalty for Terrorists Law*. This law confirms, for anybody who might still have doubted, the apartheid nature of the Israeli state. It introduces the death penalty—but only for Palestinians. Not for Jewish Israelis. In the West bank it actually makes the death sentence mandatory for Palestinians convicted in military courts of intentional killings classified as terrorism. A life sentence

Sickest of all was the recent photo of Israel's far-right security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, grinning as he receives from his wife a 'noose' cake in celebration of his birthday.

Nearly 5 million people live in informal settlements, and what is their response? Make it a crime to "incite, arrange, organise or permit a person to occupy land without the consent of the owner or person in charge of the land". (Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp)

can be imposed only in unspecified "special circumstances". Of course, that doesn't apply to the true terrorists—the settlers who routinely attack Palestinian villages and continue to illegally expel Palestinians from their land.

So it won't apply to Yinon Levi, for the 2025 murder of Awdah Hathaleen, a Palestinian activist from Umm al-Khair in the South Hebron Hills. He is currently released to house arrest. Or Yehiel Indore and Elisha Yered, arrested for the 2023 killing of Qusai Matan, also released to house arrest. In fact, there has not been a single prosecution of Israelis since 2020 for killing Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank, despite multiple fatal incidents.

And sickest of all was the recent photo of Israel's far-right security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, grinning as he receives from his wife a 'noose' cake in celebration of his birthday. It reminds us, as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of June 16, of Justice Minister Jimmy Kruger on hearing of Steve Biko's death. "It leaves me cold", he said. His audience laughed.

Solidarity with Cuba

The US blockade has helped to turn daily life in Cuba into hell. It blocks trade, limits access to finance, fuel, food, medicines and spare parts. The result is shortages, blackouts and growing hardship for ordinary Cubans. Washington then points to this hardship as proof that Cuba has failed.

Now it is adding new threats. The indictment of Raul Castro is another aggressive move which leaves open the distinct possibility of some form of US military action. The Left does not have to be uncritical of the Cuban state. But we must be clear. The first duty of solidarity is to oppose the blockade, reject US threats and defend Cuba's right to choose its own future.

Voting, yes, but democracy?

Gerrymandering is the deliberate manipulation of constituency boundaries to favour your party. And it's Trump's best hope to avoid losing control of Congress at the mid-term elections in November.

Normally in the US, constituency boundaries are revised once every 10 years, after the census. Now there is a major move—initiated by Republicans, but taken up by Democrats—to 'adjust' boundaries much earlier.

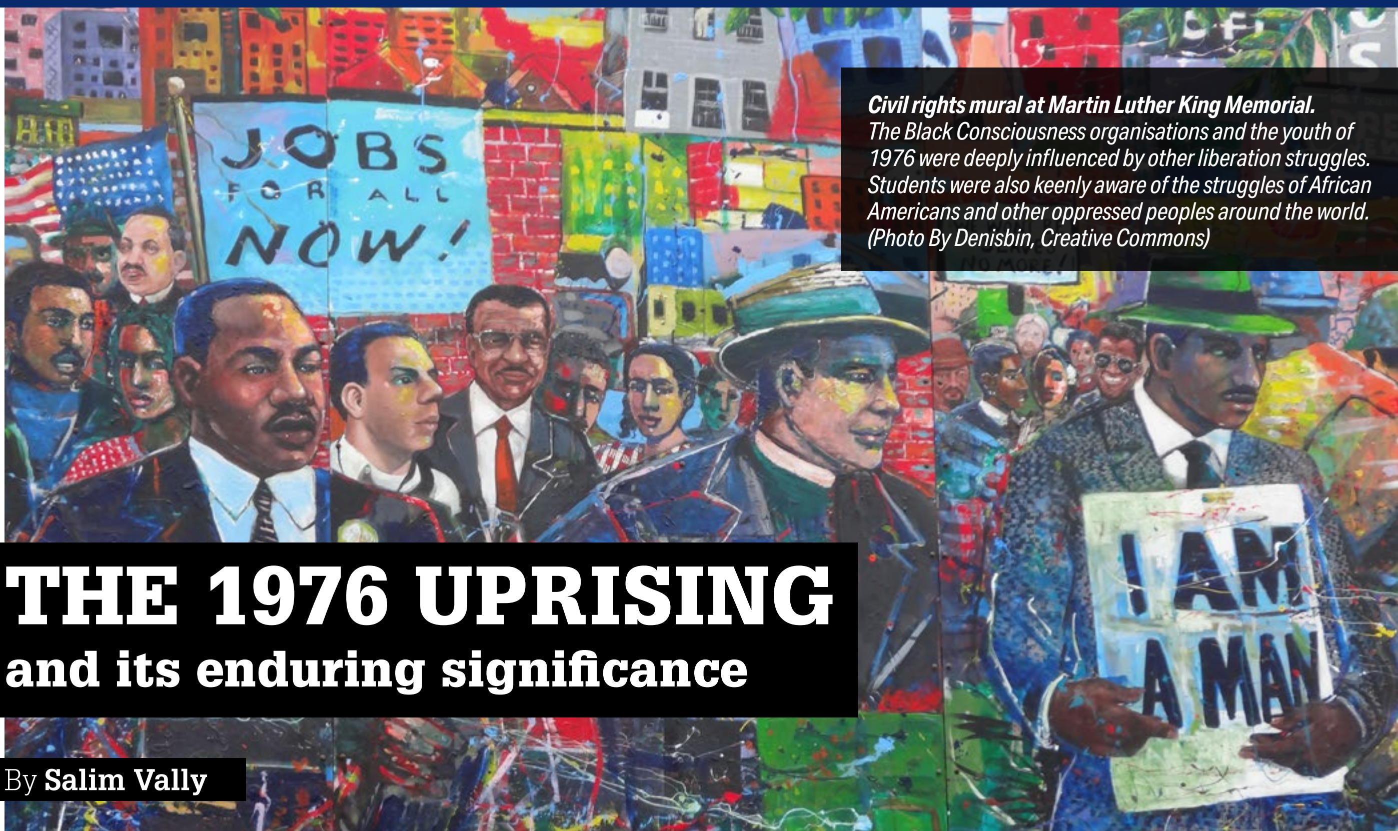
The way it works is this: imagine a city of 1 million voters. The city is broken up into five districts, each with about 200,000 voters, and each electing a representative. Roughly half the voters are traditional Democrats and the other half are traditional Republicans. A fair map would probably produce something close to a 50/50 result: perhaps two Democratic seats, two Republican seats, and one closely contested. But if you want to favour Republicans, you could draw the boundaries differently.

First, you pack Democrats into one or two districts where they would win by huge majorities. For example, one district might have 190,000 Democrats and only 10,000 Republicans. The Democrats win that seat easily, but many of their votes are wasted because they got far more than they needed to win.

Then you spread the remaining Democratic voters thinly across the other districts. Those districts could have about 105,000 Republicans and 95,000 Democrats. Republicans would win them narrowly. The final result: four Republican representatives and only one Democrat representative, even though the city is evenly divided between the two parties.

This system used to be used in the US to minimise the impact of the votes of Black people. Then the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, at the height of the civil rights movement. It outlawed racial discrimination in voting. So it banned practices that prevented Black people from having their votes count equally. The Supreme Court has now gutted that Act. This opens the door for (mainly) Republicans to go back to gerrymandering Black districts, so that they get fewer if any representatives.

And they talk about defending democracy.



Civil rights mural at Martin Luther King Memorial. *The Black Consciousness organisations and the youth of 1976 were deeply influenced by other liberation struggles. Students were also keenly aware of the struggles of African Americans and other oppressed peoples around the world. (Photo By Denisbin, Creative Commons)*

THE 1976 UPRISING
and its enduring significance

By **Salim Vally**

OVER TIME, JUNE 16 1976 HAS come to be celebrated primarily as a moment of resistance against the forced imposition of Afrikaans in schools in Soweto. That injustice was undoubtedly one catalyst for the uprising. Yet to reduce this watershed moment to a single cause is to miss its deeper meaning, its true contributions to the liberation struggle, and its lasting relevance for our own time. No event of historical importance can be understood apart from its wider context.

In this brief reflection, I merely point to several key and yet neglected dimensions of the uprising: its internationalism; its engagement with the national question; its reinforcement of worker struggles; its embrace of collective leadership and rejection of personality cults; its nonsectarian character; and its emphasis on praxis.

A globally conscious youth

The Black Consciousness organisations and the youth of 1976 were deeply influenced by other liberation struggles. They drew inspiration from the independence struggles in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola and Mozambique, as well as from popular resistance against US imperialism in South America and Asia. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were widely circulated and read in the townships. Students were also keenly aware of the struggles of African Americans and other oppressed peoples around the world.

This internationalist consciousness found explicit expression in protests against the visit of US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, in 1976. On September 18, 1976, the New York Times reported that students in Soweto had demonstrated against Kissinger's three-day visit, during which he held talks with Prime Minister John Vorster. The newspaper noted that many young protesters were killed: "The shooting began after students carrying placards denouncing Mr. Kissinger gathered in schoolyards in the black township, singing black protest songs." One placard called Kissinger "a murderer"; another read: "Kissinger, get out of Azania—don't bring your disguised American oppression into Azania".

Unity beyond apartheid's racial categories

The apartheid regime sought to divide the oppressed majority through the Bantustan policy, the Group Areas Act, and even the spatial segregation of townships such as Soweto into so-called 'Zulu' and 'Sotho' sections. Yet the students of 1976 mounted a determined challenge to these divisions. The slogan "One Azania, One Nation"—baptised in blood—resonated as a revolutionary cry. Consider the names of the young people and the places where they fell: not only Soweto, but also Manenberg, Elsies River, Montagu, Mamelodi, Alexandra, Gugulethu, Mossel Bay and Athlone. Unlike the crass racial and tribalistic identity politics of today, the youth of 1976 refused to see themselves through apartheid's imposed categories. They were not 'minorities', nor 'Zulu', 'Coloured', 'Indian' or 'Xhosa'. They were simply the oppressed united in struggle.

Moreover, though many township residents had arrived from neighbouring countries and lived 'illegally' in South Africa, they were accepted and respected by their communities. For instance, Sibongile Mkhabela (née Mthembu), one of eleven young people accused of leading the uprising, was the daughter of a Mozambican father who was a pillar of strength in the community; as were many others from Lesotho, Swaziland, Malawi and elsewhere.

Strengthening worker struggles

The 1976 uprising followed closely on the heels of massive urban worker strikes that had begun in Durban in 1973, and spread across the country; similar strikes even took place in Namibia before that. By 1979, the apartheid regime was forced to amend labour legislation to grant Black workers the legal right to form and register trade unions. Crucially, many of the key shop stewards who built that union movement had been active participants in the 1976 uprising.

The students who confronted the apartheid state, together with the workers of 1973, ushered in an unprecedented wave of struggle against racial capitalism. They demonstrated that the system was

not impregnable and could be challenged. They showed that resistance could be conducted in a non-sectarian way. They proved that even schoolgoing youth could join the fight, and that the struggle was never confined to Soweto alone, despite what some accounts of June 16 suggest.

The events of 1976 laid the foundations for a far broader challenge to the racial capitalist state; it reached even greater heights in the 1980s as workers and community organisations joined forces.

Collective leadership and the defeat of fear

The students of 1976 broke the climate of fear that had subdued older generations after the violent persecutions of the 1960s. They succeeded in bringing organisations together, especially through collaboration with their families and the worker organisations to which those families belonged. They cultivated a new corps of radical organic intellectuals rooted in grassroots organisations, and they placed a premium on collective learning and shared leadership.

We remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. The most fitting memorial is neither statues nor empty rhetoric, but the urgent work of building a better country than the one we inhabit today. For many young people, 32 years into democracy has become a nightmare.

Post-apartheid capitalism has failed to deliver on its promises—and, by its very nature, it cannot. Too often, young people are blamed for being undisciplined, lazy or lacking in the 'right skills' or entrepreneurial spirit. We seldom blame the system itself: the structural unemployment that forecloses any prospect of gainful employment for so many; the billboards, television screens and print media that bombard the youth with the seductive elixir of consumer goods; a social order in which human relations mean nothing unless they are commodified. All in a climate where corruption has embraced those once lionised by the makers of official history, and where struggle 'icons' have become affluent overnight.

A polycrisis born of racial capitalism

Who can deny that the country is in the grip of a polycrisis engendered by racial capitalism? The evidence is everywhere: levels of inequality, unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, ecological degradation, poor quality education, inadequate healthcare, soaring energy, transport and food costs, and the crushing burden of debt that most people must endure daily, through no fault of their own. Even the middle classes are not spared. Who can argue that narrow elitist and corporate interests and their corruption do not rule the day? Who can ignore the utter desperation that fuels the psychosocial trauma, gender-based violence and other forms of social dysfunction we witness daily?

Lessons for today: xenophobia and internationalism

The lessons of June 1976 are also vital for the struggle against contemporary xenophobia. Opportunistic politicians exploit the current crises to blame, scapegoat and attack 'foreigners', rather than confronting the real causes of inequality, poverty and unemployment.

The uprising reminds us of the importance of internationalism and the linking of struggles. The same crude oil extracted from the Niger Delta, the minerals of the Congo and the coal of South Africa fuel the machinery of Israeli occupation and genocide. This connects the dispossession of Palestinian lives and land directly to the exploitation of African resources by big corporations, African elites and warlords.

The logic and violence of racial capitalism, colonialism and extraction are not confined to any single place or time. They operate across borders, binding Africa, Palestine and other sites of struggle into a shared history of resistance.

Palestine stands today as a global front against colonialism, imperialism, fossil-fuel capitalism and white supremacy. It is incumbent upon all of us—solidarity activists, climate justice advocates, anti-racist and anti-imperialist organisations, and faith-based groups—to actively support the Palestinian liberation struggle and their right to resist. The genocide in Gaza is a harbinger of worse to come if we do not organise and fight back vigorously, including through the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against apartheid Israel. The empire and its global ruling classes are willing to sacrifice millions of Black and Brown bodies, and working-class people everywhere, so that they can continue accumulating capital, amassing wealth and maintaining their domination.

Colombian President Gustavo Petro recently observed: "Genocide and barbaric acts unleashed against the Palestinian people is what awaits those in the Global South. What we see in Gaza is the rehearsal of the future".

The youth of 1976 understood that freedom is indivisible. They risked everything, not for statues or hollow commemorations, but for a world in which human beings are no longer reduced to commodities, ethnic labels or disposable labour. Their legacy demands nothing less from us today: to see our struggles as linked, to reject the divisions that power imposes, and to build a genuine liberation for all.

That is the true significance of 1976—and the unfinished business before us now. Steve Biko understood this when he argued:

> *The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look but the great gift still has to come from Africa — giving the world a more human face.*

Salim Vally is the NRF Chair in Community, Adult and Workers' Education and a professor in the Education Faculty at the University of Johannesburg. He was a member of the South African Students Movement in 1976 until its banning in 1977.

March and March protest in Joburg April 30 2026. *The lessons of June 1976 are also vital for the struggle against contemporary xenophobia. Opportunistic politicians exploit the current crises to blame, scapegoat and attack 'foreigners', rather than confronting the real causes of inequality, poverty and unemployment. (Photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/GroundUp)*

"Young, Gifted and Black"

THE 1976 GENERATION OF ACTIVISTS

By **Noor Nieftagodien**

THE 1976 STUDENTS' UPRISING was the first national protest movement by Black school students in the country's history. It was unprecedented in its scale, character and impact. Soweto was at the centre of the struggle from January, culminating in the historic march by thousands of students on 16 June 1976 to demand the scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Thereafter, protests quickly spread across the country, forcing the government to rescind its racist language policy.

This movement shattered the political quiescence that prevailed after the Sharpeville massacre. With the workers' strikes of 1973, it inaugurated the process of constituting the mass movement that would overthrow apartheid.

Students who took to the streets initially to oppose Bantu Education, proceeded to create new politics and movements of resistance. In the early 1970s, this new generation of student activists constituted a relatively small and fragmented group, but they began to coalesce in various social networks and nascent organisations. The eruption of protests in 1976 placed them at the centre of mass mobilisation. Although relatively inexperienced, they drew inspiration from Black Consciousness and quickly formulated tactics and strategies to strike effective blows against the state and capital.

Soweto was at the centre of the struggle from January, culminating in the historic march by thousands of students on 16 June 1976 to demand the scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

New social force

H.F. Verwoerd, the so-called architect of apartheid, explained the underlying objective of Bantu Education: "There is no place for him [Africans] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour". It was a system designed to prepare students to be workers in the system of racial capitalism, and to entrench the structural subjugation of African people. However, there was an unintended consequence of the expansion of Bantu Education, particularly from the late 1960s. It created a large population of Black students that transformed into a potent political force from 1976.

When Bantu Education was introduced in the mid-1950s, there were about one million African school students. By 1976 that figure had grown significantly to 3.7 million. The rate of growth of Africans in secondary schools was even more impressive: between 1965 and 1976 their number increased by more than 500%, from about 66,000 to approximately 389,000. In Soweto, the student population nearly doubled, from 90,000 at the end of the 1960s to 170,000 in 1976. Between 1972 and 1974 alone, the number of secondary school students rose sharply from 12,656 to 34,656.

African students now constituted a significant social force, whose size was unparalleled in the country's history. Their large numbers also reflected Black society's emphasis on the importance of education.

However, they had to contend with overcrowding, poor infrastructure and limited resources, which became more acute in the 1970s. The deterioration of Black schooling contributed to mounting discontent among students. It was from their ranks that a new cadre of protesters and activists emerged, who were markedly different from previous generations of township youth.

Black Consciousness

These students were, mostly at least, second-generation urbanites whose social and political horizons extended beyond the townships. They were interested in global politics, especially anti-colonial movements and Black resistance generally.

Due to state repression from the early 1960s, this new cohort of politically conscious youth had little, if any, direct connections with older Black resistance organisations such as the ANC and PAC. They had no allegiance to the political programmes and strategies of these movements and had to create their own emancipatory politics. They were inspired by the rejection by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) of apartheid's racial categories and its espousal of Black unity as a means to emancipate the oppressed majority from psychological and physical oppression. These ideas offered them a framework to understand oppression and to imagine pathways to liberation. As students, they identified especially strongly with Black Consciousness's emphasis on conscientisation as a key to emancipation.

Radical readers

These young people exhibited an insatiable thirst for political knowledge, manifested by the proliferation of a reading culture. Newspapers such as The World, The Post, The Sunday Times and the Rand Daily Mail circulated widely

among parents and their children. Students were especially attracted to the African Writers Series. These novels, Kasonde Mukonde argues, "spoke directly to students, now armed with BC thought, and challenged them to look at their own marginality and transform their consciousness to perceive the beauty in themselves while radicalising them".

Books and pamphlets on Marxism, anti-colonial struggles and the civil rights movement were also widely read and debated. Works by anti-colonial intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah were popular, as were speeches and writings by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Mao Zedong.

Leading cultural theorist, Bheki Peterson, described the 1970s as marking "an important cultural renaissance in the practice of African arts and literature in South Africa". Poetry, music, art, theatre and literature all flourished, as a new desire for 'self-definition' and 'self-actualisation' took root. There was an explosion of writing and publishing by Black authors, including luminaries such as Oswald Mtshali, James Matthews, Wally Serote, Sipho Sepamla, Gladys Thomas, Fatima Dike, Nomsisi Kraai, Chris van Wyk, Mafika Gwala and Don Mattera. This radical cultural milieu was shaped by the BCM and had a profound influence on emerging student activists.

Nascent networks and organisations

When protests erupted in 1976, student political organisations were generally weak and small. However, that reality hid a less visible development from the early 1970s: networks among students that created the critical bases for conscientisation and mobilisation. In the formative years of rebuilding movements, students coalesced around friendship- or school-based groups. In conditions of repression, familiarity and trust were critical ingredients in constituting rudimentary political communities. At the same time, in Soweto, debating societies were established in most secondary and high schools and between schools, with debating competitions becoming 'unofficial training grounds' for activists and leaders. The proliferation of other associations, including sports clubs, cultural societies and religious groups also contributed to the growth of a cohort of socially active youth.

Some of these groups began to focus on local issues, such as the authoritarian behaviour of school principals or teachers, and the absence of social facilities in the townships. While not explicitly political at the beginning, they invariably transformed into spaces of political education and activism. For example, the Sharpeville Youth Club was created to keep youth from the streets, but within a few years it became involved in the creation of the National Youth Organisation. In the coloured group areas of Johannesburg, school students in the early 1970s protested Republic Day celebrations and gravitated to Black Consciousness.

Religious organisations, influenced by liberation theology, also became sites of politicisation. The University Christian Movement and the Student Christian Movement served as spaces of political apprenticeship and were closely associated with Black Consciousness. The Young Christian Workers and Young Christian Students defined themselves as "a movement of the working class ... involved in mission and ministry to the working class". This was where activists such as Kaizer Thibedi and Shepi Mati received their formative education about working-class politics and even socialism. Sibongile Mkhabela, a prominent woman leader in 1976, was a member of the Young Women's Christian Association, where she was inspired by an older generation of committed, educated and caring women activists.

Co-ordinated protests

When the protest erupted in Soweto, the South African Students Movement (SASM), an affiliate of BCM, was the main political organisation of Black school students. It had a handful of members in high schools, while its reach beyond Soweto was limited. Nonetheless, it was arguably the main training ground for student leaders of the uprising. In the weeks before June 16, SASM connected with student activists who had led the protests in early 1976. Crucially, on June 13, it created the Action Committee (led by Tsietsi Mashinini), which organised the historic march three days later.

It marked a decisive turning point in the mobilisation of student protests. In early August, a representative meeting of students established the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) that soon became the leading voice of protests in the township. The SSRC convened assemblies of students and shifted its strategic focus to mobilising united action with workers/parents. In August and September, it organised marches to the city centre and called stay-aways to strike blows against the white state and capital. Although these actions faced problems, they sought to forge unity between students and workers, two strategically important sectors of the Black population, against white power. Similar action took place in Cape Town, where marches to the city centre disrupted the apparent normality of the status quo.

The success of the 1976 student movement was built to a large extent on the foundations established in the preceding years by intersecting networks, associations and political structures. Crucially, they produced a generation of activists who became pivotal in building mass movements from the late 1970s—trade unions, civics, women's movements, student and youth organisations—that were ultimately responsible for overthrowing apartheid.

Crucially, they produced a generation of activists who became pivotal in building mass movements from the late 1970s — trade unions, civics, women's movements, student and youth organisations — that were ultimately responsible for overthrowing apartheid. (Photo: Paul Weinberg)

Noor Nieftagodien is the Head of the History Workshop at Wits University, a member of the *Amandla!* Collective and a founding member of Zabalaza for Socialism (ZASO).

UPBEAT MAGAZINE:

SACHED's response to the 1976 student uprising

By **Koni Benson**

In June 1976, thousands of Black students marched against Afrikaans as a medium of instruction and against the entire machinery of Bantu Education. The Soweto uprising, and the waves of student resistance that spread across the country thereafter, created a new demand for alternatives to apartheid knowledge itself. One response to these demands came in the platform and programme of a magazine.

Produced between 1981 and 1996 by the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), Upbeat magazine became one of the most widely read anti-apartheid publications for youth in South Africa. Despite repression, by 1982 it had a readership of around 60,000, and by 1990 this had grown to more than 105,000. It became the go-to magazine for activist youth, progressive teachers, and trade union organisers across the country throughout the 1980s. It was purposefully part of a broader experiment in liberation pedagogy, political education, and movement building.

Creating a magazine for youth was part of SACHED's response to the demands of "the 76 generation." According to Enver Motala, coordinator of SACHED's Resource Centre in Durban from 1981-1991, commitments to the Black Consciousness and the radical workers' movement, and the student uprisings led to the development of radical educational programmes with anti-racist and socialist orientations, throughout the 1980s. Upbeat was one such programme. It was initiated by John Samuel, national director from 1979-1990, who returned from exile in Zambia after the 1976 uprising:

> *School children in the townships in particular were searching for different information [and] trying to understand what was going on in the world and in South Africa and particular in Africa.*

Upbeat entered this new terrain strategically. SACHED was careful not to be kicked out of schools or to have the magazine banned (as some of their recent newspaper projects had been). It did not work with the apartheid schooling system itself but rather with teachers and students in schools, and youth who had left school for political and practical reasons. This strategic positioning, an "in but not of" the schools "undercommons" approach, became central to its politics and pedagogy.

The visuality of the magazine was striking, especially in a context of an extreme dearth of access to media and history (photo by Koni Benson)

Neville Alexander, director of SACHED's Cape Town office, described organisations like SACHED as part of outlining "a revolutionary alternative to the apartheid state." Upbeat formed one strand of this wider project of new experiments in radical education work. They ran parallel to the political and economic fronts of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Opening up imagination

Inside its pages, Upbeat attempted to open up children's imaginations beyond apartheid logics of separateness and subordination. Each edition carried short stories written by readers, excerpts from African literature, interviews, science columns, ecology features, debates, theatre reviews, penfriends, quizzes, puzzles, comics, and music features. And "Talkshop" discussions where youth from around the country debated current issues, ranging from school governance to sexism and relationships.

A quick scroll through the archive reveals article titles such as: "Beauty contests are sexist?", "Big business has its claws in soccer," "How to debate", "Building SRCs," "African jazz", "Nationalisation a way to spread wealth?", "How weather works" and "Can you say no?" Alongside articles on puff adders, reggae, recipes, and chess sat discussions on forced removals, school boycotts, corruption in homeland education departments, and violence from Natal to Grenada.

Marcus Solomon was back in the classroom after a decade on Robben Island and five years of banning. He was relieved to leave teaching in the apartheid school system to become a distributor for Upbeat in 1981. Upbeat he explains, "was seen as something that covers everything; like the capitalist world... an alternative in every dimension of education". Harriet Perlman, editor of Upbeat in the late 1980s, noted how they went to great lengths to ensure that Upbeat also strategically dovetailed with the official curriculum so that teachers would use it. And, at great risk, they did.

Sean Jacobs, the founding publisher of Africa is a Country, was at primary school in Ottery in Cape Town in the 1980s. He recalls:

> *What else did I get to read? My dad worked as a gardener for a supreme court judge in Bishopscourt and would give my dad newspapers — that was the only news, other than SABC state propaganda…There is the official curriculum, and then there is Upbeat.*

The refusal to divide political culture from education, or art from organising, shaped the entire publication. Upbeat introduced banned African history and literature in accessible forms. Muziwakhe Nhlabatsi illustrated serialised comic versions of novels by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head and Ama Ata Aidoo. Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* was published with an accompanied handwritten letter by Mphahlele to Upbeat readers. Political cartoonist Andy Mason created science

Mphahlele's Down Second Avenue was published with an accompanied handwritten letter by Mphahlele to Upbeat readers.

fiction series like Stella Starfinder's *Encyclopaedia of the Universe*. The visuality of the magazine was striking, especially in a context of an extreme dearth of access to media and history.

Reading as critical engagement

But the radicalism of Upbeat was not only in its content. It was also in its pedagogical form.

SACHED concurred with Paulo Freire's understanding that reading is not merely decoding words. It is a process of critical engagement between text and context. In a 1990 SACHED Journal article "A Book is Not a Book Until it is Read," they argued: "If we aim to challenge a passive mode of reading, then we must produce books that our readers can hold conversations with; books that shout out at the readers and prompt them to action." Upbeat attempted precisely this.

It encouraged readers not simply to consume information but to argue, write back, participate, and produce cross border conversations themselves. Fikile Mazibuko distributed up to 11,000 copies of Upbeat each month in KZN in the 1980s:

> *The children were active, a full area of creativity opened up because of Upbeat. And liking to read, because of Upbeat… Even adults wanted to read it to the end. It was* **umrhabulo***; it conscientised and broadened ones understanding of one's environments.*

By 1989, the magazine was receiving more than 150 letters each week. Readers debated sex education, politics, and music. One student wrote in 1983: "Should we be taught sex education in schools? Definitely yes!" Another complained that Upbeat was becoming too political and "boring," only for the SRC at Harold Cressy High School to respond in the next issue, defending the magazine's focus on struggle. The pages became a forum.

Readers also became writers. In 1990, a feature story titled "Stop Wishing and Start Fighting" carried a note explaining that Reuben Moshonia, a student from Daveyton, had visited the Upbeat office wanting the editors to write about local student struggles. "Why don't you write the story?" they replied. Two weeks later he returned with the article "proudly tucked under his arm". This process of creating readerships, of collectives, was as important as the printed content itself.

Distribution as educational follow up

The same was true of the labour behind the magazine. Upbeat's history highlights the political life of movement publications beyond their pages: the organising work of production, circulation, and distribution. During the States of Emergency, progressive materials had to be snuck into schools by distributors building relationships with trusted teachers.

John Samuel emphasised that distribution "was not simply a mechanical issue, it was an educational follow up." SACHED built networks of students, teachers, organisers, artists, and distributors around the magazine. Teachers used Upbeat articles to develop alternative curriculum materials that challenged apartheid textbooks. Mercia Andrews, an art teacher at Steenberg Primary in Cape Town in the early 1980s, agreed to become a distributor at the school:

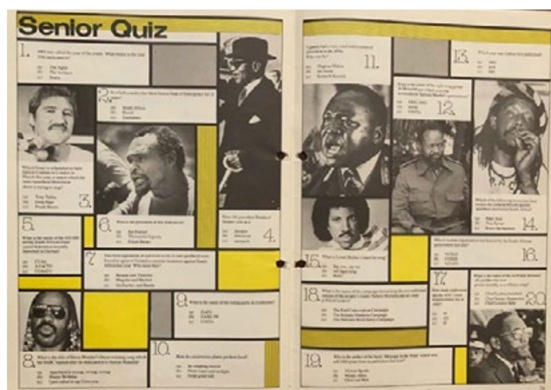
> *You can have unnuanced educational material that … doesn't speak to young people. It doesn't allow critical thinking. It wants you to swallow…This publication was very different.*

A magazine as organiser

Reading groups set up around the magazine formed the basis of the first Black teachers and domestic workers unions. Teachers, gathered around Upbeat to discuss getting African writers into the curriculum, eventually asking broader questions: how do we organise ourselves? How do we build democratic education?

The magazine demonstrates that anti-colonial periodicals were not simply containers of ideas. They were **vehicles** for organising and for building counter-institutional and counter-cultural spaces. In this way, they blurred the post-1994 normalisation and (neo)liberalisation of lines between teacher and organiser, editor and distributor, artist and activist.

The significance of Upbeat magazine lies not only in what was written in its pages, but in what those pages enabled: critical creativity, youth speaking across segregation, alternative reading cultures, democratic debate, relationships between teachers and students beyond authoritarianism, and spaces to create wider pre-emptive cultures of liberation to counter Bantu education (ie white supremacy), in response to the calls made by the 1976 generation of youth.



"If we aim to challenge a passive mode of reading, then we must produce books that our readers can hold conversations with; books that shout out at the readers and prompt them to action." Upbeat attempted precisely this.

Koni Benson is an historian, organiser, and educator in the Department of Historical Studies at UWC. This article is part of a forthcoming book, Upbeat Magazine: Liberation Pedagogy in Practice (Jacana Media, 2027).

FROM AFRIKAANS TO HEBREW:

LANGUAGE AS DOMINATION

By **Sadia Agsous-Bienstein**

IN MAY 2022, I WAS AT THE MUSEUM of Black Civilisations in Dakar. What struck me immediately was not only the scale of the building, but the political message carried by its exhibition on African languages. One panel proudly declared: "Africa, after inventing writing, never lost the use of it". The exhibition showed examples of writing systems in Coptic, Ge'ez, Tifinagh, and Hausa written in Arabic script. It reminds visitors that different groups and societies on the African continent had long produced knowledge, literature, and intellectual traditions in their own languages before and despite colonial domination.

Yet in many countries, including Algeria and Senegal, colonial languages such as French came to dominate public institutions, education, administration, and social prestige. Colonialism was not simply about occupying land or extracting wealth. It also had an aim to reorganise cultural hierarchies by marginalising indigenous languages and presenting them as inferior or incapable of modernity.

This violence against language remains one of the deepest wounds inherited from colonialism. It is today a key tool for the Zionists and their allies to try to smash the Palestinian resistance and its existence.

Settler colonialism weaponises language

I grew up in Algeria in a multilingual home. My father spoke Kabyle, the main language of Kabylia. My mother spoke a local Arabic dialect known as "bougiotte". In the streets of Béjaïa, my city, people moved naturally between languages. We also spoke French. South Africans can recognise themselves in that linguistic normality. Even if French was the language inherited from colonialism, it remained deeply present after independence.

Yet despite this linguistic richness, some languages were almost absent from public life. Kabyle was largely confined to the private sphere and today is not properly taught in schools. Our local dialect (spoken Arabic) had no place in the media or in education. As a child, I did not yet understand why some languages were valued while others were marginalised. Later, I began to understand that colonialism was one of the key elements.

"And the earth is transmitted like language", Mahmoud Darwish, Palestinian poet. *Different groups and societies on the African continent had long produced knowledge, literature, and intellectual traditions in their own languages before and despite colonial domination. (Photo: Sadia Agsous-Bienstein)*

This became even more obvious to me when thinking about Palestine and South Africa. These two places, like Algeria, share the experience of settler colonialism, even if their histories are different. Settler colonialism, with its occupation plan, is a system that seeks to replace the indigenous population politically, culturally, and symbolically. It reorganises space, rewrites history, renames places, and imposes new hierarchies. Language is one of its most powerful tools.

South Africa under apartheid offers one of the clearest examples of this process, and the uprising of Soweto in 1976 was clearly triggered by language. English and Afrikaans dominated public institutions, while indigenous languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele were marginalised. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 created a segregated educational system, designed to keep Black South Africans in subordinate positions.

June 16 and language

In 1974, the apartheid government decided to impose Afrikaans, the language of the oppressors, as a language of instruction in Black schools. Half of all subjects had to be taught in Afrikaans, even though many teachers themselves had not mastered it.

Students understood that language was being used to maintain domination and to force them into failure, exclusion and segregation. On 16 June 1976, thousands marched peacefully through Soweto to protest this linguistic policy and the apartheid system more broadly. The police opened fire on them. Hundreds of young people were killed or wounded.

The Soweto uprising became one of the defining moments of the struggle against apartheid. It revealed how deeply language and political oppression were connected. The students were not only fighting against a school reform; they were fighting against a system that denied their humanity.

This was a key historical moment that captured my attention back in Algeria. Steve Biko highlighted this connection very clearly. For him liberation was not only political but psychological and cultural. Colonial systems attempt to convince the oppressed that their languages, cultures, and histories are inferior.

Frantz Ibrahim Fanon understood this process. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he wrote: "To speak a language is to assume a world, a culture". Fanon showed that colonialism attacks the colonised not only through physical violence, but also through language and culture. The colonial language becomes associated with intelligence, civilisation, and power, while indigenous languages are treated as backward or inferior. This creates what Fanon described as an internalised inferiority complex.

Although Fanon was writing primarily about the French colonial experience, his work continues to resonate internationally, from Algeria to South Africa to Palestine. Today, he is once again being read in the context of Gaza and the ongoing destruction of Palestinian life.

Hebrew as tool of domination in Palestine

The Palestinian experience needs also to be seen through a colonial cultural lens. Hebrew played a central role in the occupation of the territory and in the broader project of Hebraising and de-Arabising Palestine. If settler colonialism is fundamentally about territorial control, as the historian Patrick Wolfe argued, language becomes another essential instrument of domination.

The Zionist project emerged in Europe in the late 19th century and drew on European colonial models before being implemented in Palestine. This political project went hand in hand with a cultural and linguistic project in which modern Hebrew occupied a key place. Modern Hebrew came to represent the figure of the "new Jew", the sabra, rooted in the land and disconnected from exile. In reality, this linguistic project was a process of Hebraisation and Judaisation of the land. Its aim was to erase the native character of the Palestinians. This process was later consolidated under British rule, the same British Empire that colonised South Africa and Australia and systematically marginalised, suppressed, or erased many indigenous languages in those territories.

Through language, place names, education, and public institutions, the colonial project sought not only to conquer the land but also to reshape its cultural identity and erase its Palestinian-Arab character.

The Palestinian writer, Ghassan Kanafani, once wrote that "Zionism fights on the language front". This sentence remains profoundly relevant today. This struggle in Palestine can be seen in the renaming of villages, streets, and landscapes; in the marginalisation of Arabic in public institutions; and in the segregationist educational system imposed on Palestinian citizens inside Israel.

Palestinian Arab children study in separate schools that are often underfunded and overcrowded compared to Jewish schools. They receive fewer educational resources and face discrimination throughout the educational system. They often face major barriers to higher education if they do not fully master Hebrew. Also, Arabic-

Students understood that language was being used to maintain domination and to force them into failure, exclusion and segregation. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

Palestinian education programmes are banned in the Palestinian schools of occupied Jerusalem.

This linguistic hierarchy was further reinforced by the 2018 Israeli Nation-State law. It officially defined Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, downgraded Arabic from an official language to a language with a "special status", and promoted Jewish settlement as a national value. Through this law, Israel officially linked Jewish identity, the Hebrew language, and the expansion of Jewish settlements within the legal structure of the state itself. All that with the silence of the powers of the world.

Language part of the ongoing Nakba

Language in Palestine is therefore not a secondary issue. It is part of what Elias Khoury called the "ongoing Nakba"—al-Nakba al-Mustamira. The Nakba did not end in 1948. It continues through displacement, occupation, and segregation, and through attempts to erase Palestinian presence culturally and linguistically.

Colonialism-Zionism attempts not only to occupy the land but also to reshape how the land is spoken about and remembered.

The destruction of Gaza since October 2023 has revealed the brutality of our contemporary world. Entire neighbourhoods, schools, universities, libraries, and archives have been destroyed. Journalists, teachers, writers, and students have been killed. What is being attacked is not only a population but also a cultural and intellectual world.

Gaza shows us that colonial violence is never only physical. It also targets memory, knowledge, and language. This is one reason why Palestine has generated such enormous solidarity across the world, especially among young people. South Africans have recognised echoes of their own history in the Palestinian struggle. The mobilisation of South Africa for Gaza is rooted not only in political solidarity but in a shared memory of settler colonialism, racial segregation, and cultural domination.

Language as resistance

Yet colonialism never fully succeeds in erasing indigenous languages and memories. Across African countries and Palestine, people continue to resist through language itself, by writing, speaking, translating, singing, and remembering in their own languages. Indigenous languages carry histories, ways of seeing the world, and forms of collective memory that colonial systems attempted to destroy but never fully succeeded. To defend a native language facing colonial domination is not simply a cultural act. It is also a political one.

From Soweto to Gaza, the struggle over language remains inseparable from the struggle for liberation.

Sadia Agsous-Bienstein is an associate professor at Sorbonne nouvelle and works in Palestine and Israel studies. She is also an activist for a decolonial Palestine.

How the 1976 uprisings

led to the people's education movement of the mid-1980s in Soweto

By **Terri Maggott**

FIFTY YEARS AGO, THE STUDENT uprisings of June 1976 radically altered the terrain of anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. They laid the foundations for the mass resistance of the mid-1980s, as they opened up new possibilities for solidarity between students, workers, parents, and teachers, and galvanised nationwide resistance beyond Soweto. Until today, the events of June 1976 remain a global symbol of resistance to apartheid and genocide beyond South Africa.

Ten years after June 1976, Sowetans were again at the forefront of education resistance. In December 1985, local organisations saw 1986—the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprisings—as a watershed year in Black education, given the sustained interruptions to schooling since 1976. Activists in Soweto and other townships drew power from the emerging civic movement that was seizing control over local governance, as well as from the trade union movement with the launch of Cosatu in 1985. They called for a "people's education" that spoke to the histories, hardships and hopes of all South Africans.

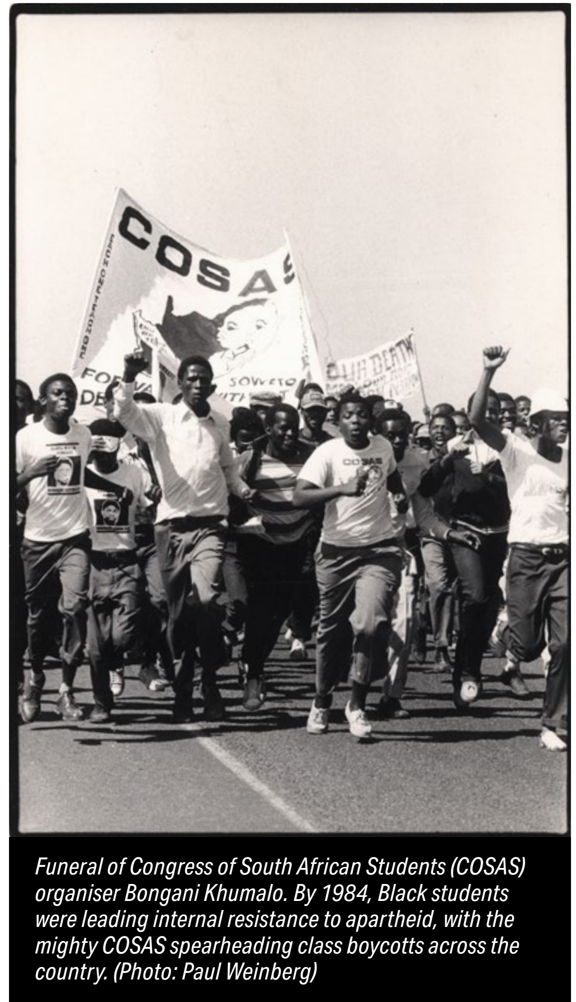
Trade unions and civics

The June 16 uprisings erupted from students' frustration with the implementation of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in Black urban schools from 1976 onwards. However, the protests that followed transcended the language issue. The militancy of students was grounded largely in the ideology of Black Consciousness (BC), which pushed them beyond their school grounds and into the struggle against the racial capitalist system of apartheid, during which they forged strategic ties with workers and trade unions. In August and September of 1976, students and workers waged two successful stayaways that bridged intergenerational divisions evident during the uprisings.

In Soweto, another source of intergenerational solidarity came from progressive parents. Shortly after 16 June 1976, Soweto parents formed the Black Parents' Association (BPA) to assist families of detained, missing and injured students. It included important activists such as Winne Mandela, Dr Nthato Motlana, Sally Motlana and Rev. Manas Buthelezi. The BPA was banned in October 1977 but soon reconstituted as the Committee of Ten chaired by Dr Motlana, a local physician and ANC member. Many of these activists were detained for their solidarity actions.

When the Soweto Civic Association (SCA) was launched in 1979, the Committee formed its first executive. By then, the state had dealt a lasting blow to the BC movement. This coincided with (or left space for) the re-emergence of Charterist politics through organisations like the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), also launched in 1979.

Rather than crush resistance, state repression instead birthed a deeper commitment among the masses to dismantling apartheid. The regime tried to reform some of the more stringent apartheid laws, but the formation of the UDF in 1983 signalled mass rejection of any reform that did not grant full political power to the Black majority.



Funeral of Congress of South African Students (COSAS) organiser Bongani Khumalo. By 1984, Black students were leading internal resistance to apartheid, with the mighty COSAS spearheading class boycotts across the country. (Photo: Paul Weinberg)

Liberation now, education later

By 1984, Black students were leading internal resistance to apartheid, with the mighty COSAS spearheading class boycotts across the country. By 1985, these had rendered township schools ungovernable. In August 1985, COSAS was banned, just one month after State President Hendrick Verwoerd—himself a key architect of Bantu Education policy—declared a state of emergency. The situation in schools was so violent that military and police presence had become an almost permanent feature of township school life. In response, many parents sent their children to the relative safety of the Bantustans. The boycotts in Soweto threatened to disrupt year-end exams scheduled for October 1985. Learning was virtually impossible, and the political climate was compounded by dilapidated school buildings, underqualified teachers, and lack of access to essential textbooks and stationery.

As boycotts continued, parents committees sprang up nationally. In Soweto, an SCA meeting on 13 October 1985 deliberated a collective response to the exam issue, and the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (SPCC) was formed. It was mandated to meet with Deputy Minister of Defence and Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, about removing the military from Soweto schools so that exams could proceed in (relative) peace. A week later, the SPCC reported to a second meeting that Vlok was unavailable or unwilling to grant them an audience. Instead, representatives met with Sam de Beer, Deputy Minister of Education and Development Aid, who agreed that

exams would be postponed to 7 January 1986. However, 1985 year-end exams were only written in March 1986, after a complicated battle with authorities.

Unlike the BPA, who had limited engagement with formal education authorities, the SPCC met with various ministers at least ten times, from its inception in late-1985 to its demobilisation in 1987. It was made up of key Soweto activists who were deeply impacted by 1976. Curtis Nkondo, of the non-racial National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA), was the principal of Lamula High School in Meadowlands. He was also a leading figure in the Soweto Teachers Action Committee that mobilised teachers in a mass exodus of the profession in 1977, in defiance of Bantu Education. Dr Motlana, a leading ANC activist from Dube, was instrumental in the formation of the BPA and Soweto Committee of Ten. Like many young people after 1976, one of Motlana's own sons skipped the border to join the liberation movement in exile, which shows the deep enmeshment of personal and political life.

On Christmas Day 1985, the SPCC sent a three-member delegation to meet with exiled ANC leaders in Lusaka, Zambia, and thus consolidated its position in the constellation of Congress alliances.

People's education for people's power

Another pressing issue for the SPCC was the schools boycott. The banning of COSAS forced angry students to re-organise, and organisations like the Soweto Students' Congress (SOSCO) and the Transvaal Students' Congress (TRASCO) emerged to fill this void. They worked closely with the SPCC to organise what is perhaps the most historically significant convention in Black education, the National Education Conference at Wits University on 28–29 December 1985.

About 700 representatives from 200 organisations, including the South African Council of Churches, South African Committee on Higher Education, UDF, NEUSA, Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), and many other student, youth and civic structures, attended. They resolved that students would return to school in January 1986, but on condition that the government meet six critical demands by March 1986:

- Re-schedule examination dates to a time agreed on by students, parents and teachers;
- Lift the emergency in all areas;
- Withdraw the military from all townships;
- Unban COSAS;
- Reinstate all dismissed teachers and release all detained students; and
- Allow schools to elect democratic student representative councils (SRCs).

The Wits conference marked a massive shift in education resistance, and the earlier slogan "liberation now, education later" was replaced by "people's education for people's power". This emphasised occupying and taking control of schools, rather than boycotting. Schools were thus repositioned as sites of renewed struggle. This shift coincided with a broader move towards adult literacy and worker education in the trade unions. The conference also mandated the formation of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) to coordinate national campaigns against apartheid.

As March 1986 drew closer, the SPCC realised that its demands would go unmet. Under the auspices of the NECC, the SPCC organised a second national conference in Durban on 27–28 March 1986.

The Durban conference defied the government by declaring COSAS unbanned. It called on students to elect SRCs in schools, and on parents to withdraw from school management committees and elect parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs) instead. Both BC- and ANC-aligned groups participated in both conferences, and their differences produced tangible tensions over People's Education. AZAPO representatives walked out on the first day of the Wits conference and because the Durban conference took place on the same weekend as the national conference of the BC-aligned National Forum, ANC-aligned organisations dominated the trajectory of the process. But BC groups, especially students, participated robustly in the NECC up until the early 1990s.

Soweto activists lead

Ten years after 1976, Soweto activists were again leading education resistance. These activists drew on local political networks established in the 1970s and evoked the memory of 1976 to channel student frustration away from the frontlines and back into classrooms, towards "people's education". But on 12 June 1986, just days before the tenth anniversary, the government detained hundreds of anti-apartheid activists, including some of the SPCC. By 1987, the NECC itself was banned and the SPCC activists that had been absorbed into its leadership faced serious police intimidation. By 1989, People's Education was effectively demobilised. It was only in 1990 that a new layer of activists emerged, under the banner of the Soweto Education Coordinating Committee, to take up education liberation for Sowetans.

While the road from 1976 to 1986 was not linear, without the disruptive actions of students on that fateful day in 1976 and the politics that came from it (student-worker solidarity, parents' organisations, and the proliferation of local education crisis committees nationally), people's education would arguably not have manifested in the mid-1980s.

A democratic SRC is a structure of students, by students and for students, says SOSCO executive

Tight structures make SOSCO strong

Students are organising into deep-rooted structures in Soweto schools. Saspu interviewed SOSCO president, Eric Nkomo.

The banning of COSAS forced angry students to re-organise, and organisations like the Soweto Students' Congress (SOSCO) and the Transvaal Students' Congress (TRASCO) emerged to fill this void.

Terri Maggott is a doctoral candidate at the University of Johannesburg's Department of Sociology.

Gender and the Black Consciousness Movement

By **Sibusisiwe Nxongo**

THE BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS Movement (BCM) was born at the University of Natal in 1968, when African students broke away from the multi-racial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). These students observed the conditions of racial oppression firmly entrenched in South African society, and a seeming acquiescence of earlier generations. They envisioned a new society where Black people overcame their inferiority complex, recognised their self-worth, became self-reliant, and liberated themselves from oppression.

The term 'Black' encompassed all groups that were oppressed by apartheid (African, Indian and Coloured). For BC leaders, Black solidarity had to be achieved, first and foremost, before any work to dismantle apartheid could begin. So other forms of oppression, most notably gendered oppression, were not part of its discourse.

In the publications of the South African Students Organisation (SASO), for instance, the most famous slogan, which came to encapsulate BC ideology, was "Black Man, you are on your own". This ostensibly excluded women from the idea of 'humanness' put forward by BC thinkers. Although SASO's constitution clearly stated that "words importing masculine gender shall also denote feminine gender", earlier writings (from the late 1960s) pointed not only to gender-exclusionary politics but also to sexist rhetoric in BC discourses.

Women were members and leaders

However, unlike in earlier South African liberation movements, women were formal members and founding leaders in BC organisations. In SASO, activists such as Vuyelwa Mashalaba, Thenjiwe Mtintso, Oshadi Mangena, Mamphela Ramphele, and Deborah Matshoba rose through the ranks of leadership. Winifred Kgware was the first president of the BCM's umbrella organisation, the Black People's Convention (BPC), founded in 1972. Maphiri Daphne Masekela, a founding member of the BPC, played a pivotal role in advancing BC ideals within ecumenical organisations. Sibongile Mkhabela was a leader in the South African Students Movement (SASM), which led the Soweto student uprising in 1976.

Unlike in earlier South African liberation movements, women were formal members and founding leaders in BC organisations. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

These women's life histories show the tensions that arose in gender relations within a movement that often treated women as subordinate in a 'man's' movement, even as it offered opportunities for women to assert themselves as formidable leaders and activists.

It was Maphiri Masekela who wrote, in her 1971 essay, *Black Consciousness and the Role of the Black Woman*, that "We [Black women] must appreciate that we are Black first and then woman". This was to encourage Black women to rally together with men in the anti-apartheid struggle. As with other BC intellectuals, Masekela envisioned a Black society which had "closed its ranks" and removed its racial inferiority, to fight against white racism. This set aside differences in gender, class, and ethnicity.

However, it did not mean that Black women activists within the BCM were not conscious of their experiences as women. In 1972, Deborah Matshoba, a SASO member at the University of Natal's Black Section (UNB), proposed a women's wing for SASO, to be named the Women's Students Organisation (WSO). However, the idea was dismissed to avoid splitting women's attention between two struggles.

Challenging gender norms

Thenjiwe Mtintso, in an interview with Danny Massey in 1999, highlighted conservativism as one of the main barriers to women's entry in the BCM. Women who lacked the kind of assertiveness that BC women possessed and believed in traditional gender roles often fell by the wayside, especially in political debates. So, in a 1998 interview, Mamphela Ramphele highlighted how they challenged gender norms by asserting themselves in student debates and political gatherings. She stated that "[she] became one of the few women who became a pain in the side of a lot of men who used to really think that [women] were there as decorations." These women were part of SASO's inner circle and, along with their male counterparts, organised student discussions, canvassed for membership, and spearheaded community projects.

The first meeting of the BPC took place in Maphiri Masekela's home in Dube, Soweto, in January 1972. She was part of the ad hoc committee which drafted the organisation's constitution. She was heavily involved in women's organisations, serving as the director of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) Women's Division, and heading its Domestic Workers' Project (DWP) in the early 1970s.

However, she deliberately separated her gender from her racial political activism. BCM organisations were closely linked to Christian Ecumenical movements, which engaged with the women's question. So BC activists were sensitised to the women's liberation movement and feminism, even as they rejected the latter as a Western concept.

Black is beautiful

The BCM's gender politics were clearly reflected in how women were expected to look, dress and present themselves. Influenced by the Black Power Movement (BPM) in North America and its Black is Beautiful slogan, women in the BCM shed their wigs in favour of afros, rejected skin-lightening creams, and wore shweshwe (African-printed fabric).

How they looked differentiated them from women outside the movement, whom they called *gumba* (party) material. In the 1930s, Black newspapers, such as the Bantu World, had endorsed the concept of the 'modern girl', who used modern cosmetics. What is interesting, as Mntintso remarked in an interview, was that their male counterparts seemed more attracted to the 'party girls'. This shows how deeply European standards of beauty, promoted in popular media, were woven into ideas of 'Black modernity'.

Although they embraced a more 'African' look, BC women still transgressed respectability standards by wearing mini dresses and hot pants. They ran the risk of being accused by their male peers of being sexually provocative and promoting promiscuity, which threatened racial pride. This sentiment was often expressed in newspapers such as The World.

However, reactions from the BCM on this imagery were contradictory. For instance, a poem by Leopold Senghor (first president of independent Senegal) that praised Black women's "natural beauty" appeared in a SASO newsletter in 1970, with lines like, "naked woman, black woman [...] with your form which is beauty!" Interestingly, BC women were not interested in being 'respectable'. They often share stories of their 'boy-like' behaviour; running the streets and intimidating white people, smoking cigarettes, frequenting the gumbas, and eating sheep's head with the men. This was a deliberate act of asserting their equality; the practice of eating sheep's head, from one plate as a group, was, in many African societies, reserved for men, with no women present.

Sibongile Mkhabela

SASO engaged SASM activists in seminars and workshops where they received leadership training and engaged in political debates and self-help projects with the BPC. Mkhabela attributes her political awakening to this political education. More directly, she credits much of her politicisation to women activists such as Ellen Khuzwayo and Deborah Matshoba.

In her memoir, *Open Earth and Black Roses: Remembering 16 June 1976*, Mkhabela wrote with pride about how she managed to recruit young girls to join the male-dominated commerce class, rather than take 'feminised' subjects like domestic science. She pleaded with her friend not to continue with a subject "intended to keep Black women in white women's kitchens". She credits her early feminism to her mother, who was less educated but raised her and her siblings in a gender-neutral household. These were foundational moments which brought her into the BCM.

She was an executive member of SASM in 1976 and was heavily involved in the strategic planning for the students' march. She worked closely with Tsietsi Mashinini and Seth Mazibuko. She was in Standard 10 at Naledi High School, but was directly affected by the introduction of Afrikaans when she failed her Standard 8 at BW Vilakazi High School a couple of years earlier.

As SASM leaders, they planned routes and crowd control, and how they would respond when provoked by the police. She was the only woman in these meetings; however, this did not seem to deter her. She wrote that being the only woman gave her "sacrosanct space for reflection, and for strengthening [my] individual commitment to the cause", because her male peers did not expect very much from her. She described her contribution to the strategic meetings as people-focused, always ensuring as few casualties as possible if anything went wrong during the march. In fact, of course, the security police opened fire on the students and killed unarmed students that day.

Mkhabela was the only woman among eleven students arrested and charged with sedition. Their case became known as the Soweto 11 trial. They were convicted in May 1979, and Mkhabela received a six-year sentence, with a four-year suspended sentence. She describes the moment after her sentence in her memoir:

> *I felt numb inside. I had to raise my fist higher in defiance of my own sense of loss and fear of the unknown…I felt the loneliness of being the only woman amongst men and getting convicted. I thought of Ma [mother] and Gogo [grandmother]; her scream would not leave me; I heard it loud and clear.*

In her memoir, Open Earth and Black Roses: Remembering 16 June 1976*, Sibongile Mkhabela wrote with pride about how she managed to recruit young girls to join the male-dominated commerce class, rather than take 'feminised' subjects like domestic science. She pleaded with her friend not to continue with a subject "intended to keep Black women in white women's kitchens." (Unknown Afrapix photographer)*

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LED BY LEARNERS:

GRIEF AND REVOLT ON BLACK CAMPUSES

By **Anne Heffernan**

Fifty years ago, school children in Soweto changed the course of resistance to apartheid, and brought the attention of the world to the injustices Black children faced in 1970s South Africa. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

FIFTY YEARS AGO, SCHOOL children in Soweto changed the course of resistance to apartheid, and brought the attention of the world to the injustices Black children faced in 1970s South Africa. Their **mobilisation** against the government's decree to impose Afrikaans as a teaching medium in their classrooms addressed an immediate injustice in their lives. But they also worked to connect it to wider struggles against 'The System', as apartheid was commonly called. Their posters decried the Afrikaans decree, but also Bantu Education, and the entire government of John Vorster.

The children of Soweto were not unique in this approach to activism, which tied the specific to the structural. The system of apartheid was pervasive, and resistance to it emerged just as widely—in unions, civics, churches, and mosques. But education had been a frequent flashpoint. Everyday material issues like corporal punishment and poor food quality were linked to the structural limits placed on the aspirations of Black students by the failures of the Bantu Education system. For years these had been perennial points of protest on the campuses of the three Black rural universities: the University of Fort Hare, the University of the North, and the University of Zululand.

Ten years ago, for the 40th anniversary of the Soweto uprising, I **wrote** in *Amandla! 46* about the connections between the school children in Soweto, and that other product of the Bantu Education system: rural universities (so-called 'bush colleges'), which were segregated by race and ethnic group. I wrote then about the influence of young teachers who had graduated from Turfloop (then the University of the North, now the University of Limpopo) on a new generation of activists in Soweto's schools. Onkgopotse Tiro's legacy, as an expelled student activist and, briefly, a teacher at Morris Isaacson High School, looms large.

Campuses like Turfloop had been sites of growing student protest since the late 1960s. These were marked by moments of rupture, like protests over Tiro's expulsion in 1972 and a pro-Frelimo rally in 1974. By 1976, class boycotts and walk-outs were familiar features of campus life at all the rural universities.

May 1976: revolution brewing

May 1976 was a period of political foment across South Africa, and education was at the heart of the brewing storm. The **Trial of the SASO Nine** was playing out in a Pretoria courtroom, and bringing circumstances at rural Black universities into national headlines. The campuses of those universities were flash-points for political action; on May 8, students at the University of Zululand clashed with Inkatha supporters and the entourage of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, leader of the KwaZulu Bantustan. He had come to be awarded an honorary doctorate at the day's graduation ceremony. Two weeks later, six lecturers at Turfloop were arrested and detained without trial by Security Branch police for alleged terrorist activity with banned organisations. And students at a handful of junior secondary schools in Soweto had embarked on a school strike over the government's decree that they must learn in Afrikaans.

Protests were also common at the white, English speaking universities; in autumn 1976, one Wits student carried a poster which read "Don't start the revolution without us". Change—perhaps even the potential for revolutionary change—was in the air, but it wasn't yet clear where it would happen first.

Looking back on this moment, before the events of 16 June 1976 catapulted student activism onto the national and international stage, can help us to understand the wider circumstances in which the uprising came about. It can also help us to understand how Soweto became centred as a key site of activism, and how this influenced other spaces of resistance. In May 1976 the revolution might have started in any number of places. As the sign carried by the Wits student suggested, university students were primed to lead change. But by the middle of June, universities, along with the rest of the nation, were being led by learners in the streets of Soweto.

Anger and grief on Black campuses

The racist (il)logic of apartheid dictated university enrollment based on ethnicity (rather than course of study, or proximity to home). Because of this, the Universities of the North, Zululand, and Fort Hare all served the population of Soweto. Many of the students on these campuses had younger siblings who were involved in the uprising. Some had lost family members or friends to the police's violent crack-down on protesters. The reactions on these campuses were swift, and characterised by both anger and grief. They drew on repertoires of protest that had been developed over years of local struggles, and employed as recently as weeks before, but they were larger in both scale and scope.

On 18 June, at the University of Zululand in Ngoye, students set fire to campus buildings and torched the cars and houses of white staff. They used stones and other portable objects to impede and damage cars. This was notably a tactic that they had used the month before, during protests around the visit of Chief Buthelezi to campus. The events in June were a change in degree, though not in kind; they marked an escalation in the use of violence in student resistance on campus. This was influenced directly by the use of violence by police against children in Soweto. When questioned by a Rand Daily Mail reporter, one University of Zululand student explained, "We used violence to take revenge for those shot at Soweto".

Scenes at the University of the North were similar. In the first days following the start of the uprising, students tried to burn down lecture halls, the Student Representative Council office, and the Sovenga post office. At Fort Hare, on 17 June, students also stoned cars, smashed windows and tried to burn buildings; police were called in to campus and used teargas on protesting students.

The rage that was being channeled through these forms of protest was only part of the reaction on campuses. The other prevalent feeling was grief: at Turfloop, nearly 2,000 students gathered on the playing field on 18 June and prayed for those killed in Soweto. As they knelt on the field and prayed, they were observed by a large contingent of police reservists. They had been brought to campus in response to the scale of protests on 17 June. At the University of Zululand, on 18 June, students streamed out of buildings in a silent procession, just hours after two buildings had been burned. At Fort Hare, a four-hour mass meeting on 17 June had been organised by the SRC to plan for a "Day of Prayer for Soweto". But the university was closed suddenly in the wake of the violence that broke out after the meeting, and the day of prayer was never held.

All three universities closed quickly in the wake of student protests that responded to the Soweto uprising; in most cases, students had only recently returned to campus before they were once again sent home. Residences were closed, and students made to leave campus. For many, this meant a return to homes in Soweto, and other townships, where they joined the protests of their younger siblings and clashed with police. Far from depoliticising students, university closures solidified the already very strong link between campus struggles and those in schools.

Protests continued

Months later, as universities began to reopen, they repeated old tactics to limit any potential for future activism on campus. In most cases students had to apply for readmittance, and sign statements affirming they would not take part in any political activism. All three institutions also instituted indemnity charges: admitted students were required to pay a fee towards any potential property damage during the academic year. In most cases this was refundable; it was meant to act as insurance against property damages of the type that had swept campuses in June 1976. But this had very limited effect. All three universities continued to experience large scale protests into the 1977 academic year—when a new cohort of students matriculated, many coming from the protest crucible of township schools—and beyond.

Mass mobilisation and the rise of new student movements in the 1980s continued to galvanise activism on campuses, and links with township schools. The three rural Black universities were intentionally placed in bantustans, removed from urban centres and sites of power. But despite this they remained closely tied to networks of activism across the country. This had always been true; the design of ethnic universities meant that they were inextricably linked to the largest urban townships. But no event made this clearer than the response of those campuses to the events of the Soweto uprising, where university students were prompted to new heights of protest by the experience of their comrades in Soweto schools.

On May 8, 1976 students at the University of Zululand clashed with Inkatha supporters and the entourage of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, leader of the KwaZulu Bantustan. He had come to be awarded an honorary doctorate at the day's graduation ceremony. (Photo: Unknown Afrapix Photographer)

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GALESHEWE: THE UPRISING BEYOND SOWETO

By **Happy Vena**

THE SOWETO UPRISING STANDS AS a poignant reminder of the young people who rose against oppression and paid the ultimate price in the liberation struggle. It was a pivotal moment in South African history. It reignited the fight against apartheid and resuscitated the broader liberation struggle. Thousands of youths from various black residential areas mobilised in solidarity with their Soweto counterparts.

However, most of the existing literature tends to concentrate on major urban centres such as Johannesburg and Cape Town. This paper focuses on an area usually ignored in discussions of anti-apartheid activism: Galeshewe in Kimberley, Northern Cape.

The Soweto uprising had a ripple effect in Kimberley. After three months of relative calm, partially due to the June academic recess, unrest suddenly broke out among Galeshewe students on 2 September 1976. The scale and intensity of these demonstrations were not comparable to the Soweto uprising, given the smaller population in Kimberley and Galeshewe. But, for the individuals who participated in this protest, it was their way of contributing to the fight against apartheid.

Significance

The Galeshewe student uprising made a significant contribution towards the liberation struggle. However, its role is tainted by omissions and has somewhat slipped through the cracks of history. This is partly because Kimberley's Black community has always been regarded as conservative and out of the reach of mainstream media. For the same reason, the apartheid government decided to place Robert Sobukwe under house arrest in this area. However, this perception does not do justice to the sacrifices made by the people of Kimberley during times of resistance against apartheid.

This paper examines the relationship between structural forces, such as the oppressive apartheid laws, and the agency of students (particularly those in Galeshewe) in fighting against these forces.

Causes of the uprising

Many writers champion the notion that inferior and oppressive education was pivotal in the development of the protest. Bantu Education meant poor infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and an inferior curriculum. These conditions, coupled with other socio-economic grievances, intensified students' resentment and hostility towards the apartheid state. Ultimately, they created a conducive environment for resistance.

The security police moved decisively into the township, employing intimidation, with multiple arrests, and heavy patrolling to dismantle student resistance.

On 3 September 1976, more than 200 students from St. Boniface Mission School and Tshireleco High School embarked on a peaceful march to the Transvaal Police Station". Thery were the first Black students to march to a white police station in the country.

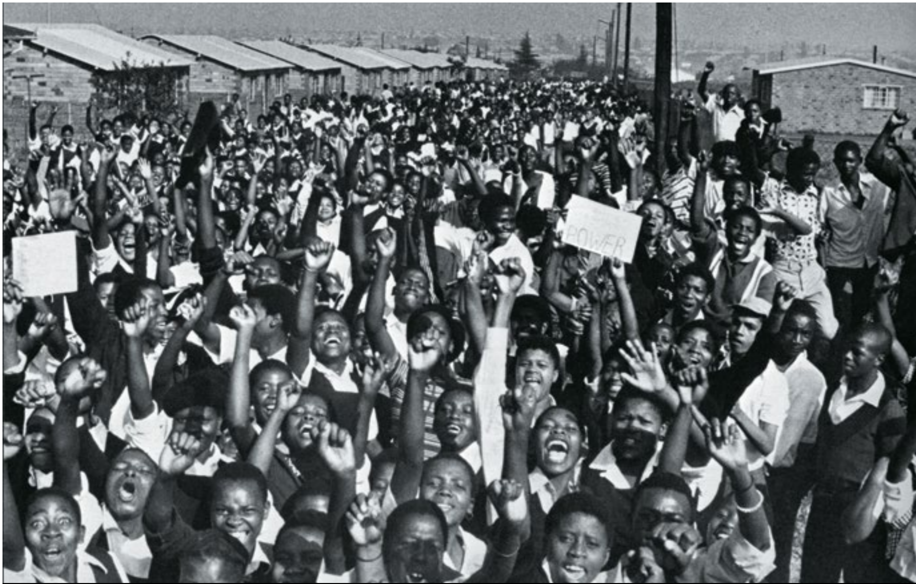
The 1976 Galeshewe uprising reflects similar dynamics. Galeshewe student demonstrations were driven by the dehumanising conditions that they were subjected to under the Bantu Education structure. This educational system was characterised by structural conditions that ultimately became the main driving force behind the demonstrations.

In addition, the rapid expansion of schooling in the 1970s turned classrooms into political spaces where students shared ideas, developed a collective consciousness, and began to challenge the status quo. As more African youth entered secondary schools, these spaces evolved into hubs of resistance. Between 1970 and 1978, additional primary and secondary schools were constructed in Galeshewe to accommodate the tremendous student population. Students transformed schools into spaces of political awakening. Schools became a rite of passage where students shared ideas that nurtured a collective consciousness. Schools were structures that were initially built to uphold apartheid's control over the African population. Students turned them into tools of resistance.

What happened in Galeshewe

On 2 September 1976, several students from St. Boniface embarked on a protest, pelting a beer hall. Beerhalls were seen as destructive for the entire Black community. The change in political ideology and the spread of Black Consciousness made young people aware that such establishments were meant to derail the Black community. Students viewed the establishment of beerhalls as an attempt by the apartheid government to dismantle the Black family structure. So, to demonstrate their frustration with societal grievances, students used them as a point of reference to express their anger. Five beerhalls were petrol-bombed as an act of resistance against the system of oppression.

Five students were detained after this incident. Among them was Sipho Majola. Majola and his comrades were charged with incitement and contravening the Terrorism Act. Majola was only 19 years old during the time of his arrest, doing Form 5 (grade 10)



Galeshewe students resonated deeply with the course of the Soweto students' revolts, which inspired them to take an active stand in the fight against oppression. Although, their resistance was short-lived, it reminds us that townships like Galeshewe are not merely footnotes in the liberation struggle. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

at St. Boniface Catholic School. He had already been politicised through contact with Robert Sobukwe in Kimberley. Sobukwe, the founding president of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), made major contributions to the foundations of political conscientisation in Galeshewe during his house arrest there.

Majola was one of the few individuals who had regular contact with Sobukwe during his banishment in Kimberley. As a result, Majola emerged as a central organiser of the protest in Galeshewe against inferior education, in unison with counterparts across the country, in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising.

On 3 September 1976, more than 200 students from St. Boniface Mission School and Tshireleco High School embarked on a peaceful march to the Transvaal Police Station (now known as the Phakamile Mabija Police Station) singing "*Nkosi Sikelela i-Africa*!" and holding placards that read "We want Sipho!". They were the first Black students to march to a white police station in the country. Their march symbolised a powerful breakthrough in the liberation struggle. The Soweto students had a huge impact in inspiring Galeshewe students to actively fight against oppression.

Interestingly, halfway through the students' march to the Transvaal Police Station, Brother O'Brian, the principal of St. Boniface Mission School, was seen speaking to them. He assured the crowd that he sympathised with them. He further encouraged them to focus on the upcoming examination. He mentioned that he hoped that Majola would also write the exam. Lastly, he urged the crowd to disperse peacefully while the police kept a watchful eye on the students' gathering. Brother O'Brian's statement, which aimed to calm the protesting students, was probably an attempt to prevent a situation that could have erupted into violence.

The resistance continued

Nonetheless, acts of resistance did not dissipate in the aftermath of the initial protest. They persisted, including stone-throwing and arson that erupted across Galeshewe. For instance, the open-air sports arena's boxing ring was set alight. These actions unfolded concurrently in different parts of the township, reflecting a continued, though less coordinated, defiance against state repression.

The security police moved decisively into the township, employing intimidation, with multiple arrests, and heavy patrolling to dismantle student resistance. For example, on the morning of 10 September 1976, the township was showered with pamphlets warning residents not to participate in any riotous activity. The pamphlets were dropped from a light aircraft. They cautioned residents that they would have to pay to repair any damage sustained during the unrest. There was no riot or civil disturbance insurance coverage on properties in Galeshewe. Therefore, Galeshewe residents would bear the cost of repairs should any property be destroyed.

This was a clear attempt by the authorities to discourage participation and dismantle the student protests, by instilling fear of financial consequences. The circulation of these warnings, likely linked to the security apparatus's intensified presence, contributed to a climate of heightened fear and caution, further curbing overt resistance.

On 16 September 1976, the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* reported that Majola and several others were released on R200 bail after a brief appearance in the Kimberley Regional Court, with the case postponed to 18 October 1976 and no plea required. However, oral testimonies collected during this research challenge this account. According to Lentikile Mattews, while some students, including Joseph Rakubo, were released, Majola remained in police custody until November and completed his matric examinations while imprisoned at the Transvaal Police Station.

Following his release on bail, Majola fled the country to Botswana, becoming a fugitive at a young age. He was likely to face a severe sentence because of his involvement in a banned political organisation and violation of the Riotous Assembly Act.

Following police repression and intimidation, the 1976 Galeshewe student uprising became dormant, as key leaders were taken into police custody

The lessons remain relevant

Galeshewe students resonated deeply with the course of the Soweto students' revolts, which inspired them to take an active stand in the fight against oppression. Although their resistance was short-lived, it reminds us that townships like Galeshewe are not merely footnotes in the liberation struggle. They were crucial to its making. Recovering these histories is about recognising the agency of communities whose contributions have long been overlooked.

Today, South Africa grapples with significant educational inequality and other social injustices. The experiences of 1976 remain strikingly relevant. The structural conditions that pushed students into the streets have not entirely disappeared. Nonetheless, the legacy of Galeshewe student activists lies not only in what they did, but in what they represent: a reminder that even in places deemed politically unconscious, resistance can emerge and challenge the status quo.

Happy Vena is a Master's student at Sol Plaatje University and an emerging historian committed to uncovering marginalised histories.

JUNE 1976: TEMBISA'S STUDENTS ROSE UP

By **Tshepo Moloi**

On 17 June 1976, a day after the students' uprising erupted in Soweto, students from Tembisa High and Boitumelong Secondary Schools took to the streets. They did this first in solidarity with their counterparts in Soweto, and later against Bantu Education and the apartheid system in general.

This may not have been a planned demonstration, but it was certainly not a knee-jerk reaction. Some of the students from these schools, especially its leaders, were politically conscientised in the early 1970s. Their political awakening was shaped in a variety of ways. These included contact with an ex-political prisoner from Robben Island and links with students from Soweto, who were interacting with seasoned political activists and trade unionists. They also included the influence of debating societies, both at school and in church youth clubs, and of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).

Tembisa township

In the 1950s, the National Party government established model townships. Their purpose was to control the influx of Africans into the urban areas and to segregate them from the white areas in the urban areas. One of these was Tembisa on the East Rand (today Ekurhuleni).

Tembisa, meaning Promise in isiZulu, was established in 1957, 14 kms from Kempton Park and 48 kms from Johannesburg. From its establishment until 1976, Tembisa did not experience any political protests or mobilisation, except for the formation of clandestine cells of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), which existed for a brief period in the early 1960s. There are three reasons for this. First, during Tembisa's foundation stage, the local authorities controlling the township managed to provide essential services for the residents, albeit minimally, without increasing rent charges. Second, the economic boom in the 1960s helped the township's wage-earning families to experience a small increase in their income. And third, the 1960s were characterised by unprecedented state repression. This instilled fear in the residents and caused them to avoid politics, or at least overt political protest.

The youth's political awakening

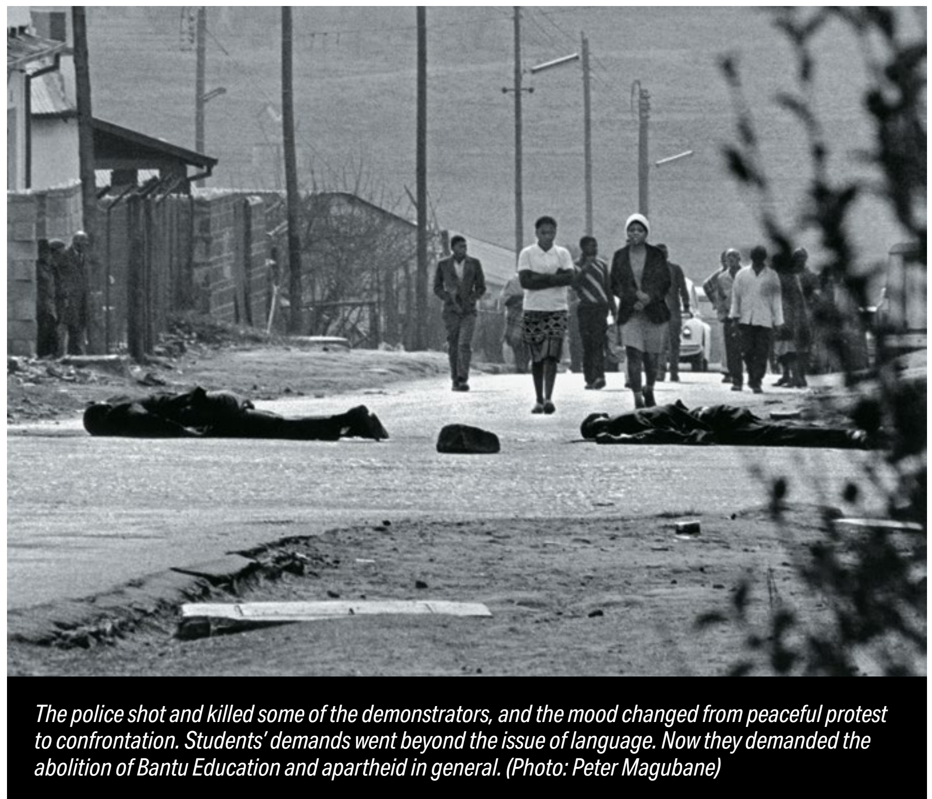
The youth in Tembisa were drawn into the struggle through various political routes. The release of political prisoners, especially those from Robben Island, played a vital role in political conscientisation. Maile Simon Ramogale, who was on Robben Island for PAC activities and released in 1969, recalled that before he left prison, he was instructed to conscientise youth and recruit workers to the PAC: "I used to tell them about my understanding of the PAC. But I would not say go and become a member". Later, Ramogale recruited some of the young people in the township and helped them to flee the country into exile to join the PAC's military wing, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA).

Michael 'Figo' Madlala had been in touch with Soweto student leaders such as Sediane 'Dan' Montsisi and Murphy Morobe before the student demonstrations in Tembisa. Morobe, in particular, had been interacting with Joe Gqabi (who was on Robben Island until 1975 for ANC activities) and Elliot Shabangu and John Nkadimeng, both trade unionists. Morobe and his peers politicised Madlala and helped him with organisational skills. In 1975, Madlala and some of his schoolmates at Tembisa High formed the Tembisa Student Organisation (TSO) to mobilise students.

Schools provided students with a political opening where they could meet in a safe environment to exchange and share information about the political situation in the country. High schools were important in bringing together literate, inquisitive youths with similar social backgrounds and grievances.

Debates became crucial in shaping students' political consciousness. "Tembisa High and schools in the townships around the East Rand debated", recalled Teboho Tsenase, a former Tembisa High student. They debated topics like "The tree of liberty grows better when watered with the blood of the martyrs" and "The pen is mightier than the sword". The safe environment provided by the school enabled students to raise questions that they would not bring up outside the school, for fear of reprimand or scolding. This deepened their desire to know more about certain issues beyond the prescribed curriculum.

Because of the prevailing unequal standard of education (and inequality in



The police shot and killed some of the demonstrators, and the mood changed from peaceful protest to confrontation. Students' demands went beyond the issue of language. Now they demanded the abolition of Bantu Education and apartheid in general. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

general) in the country, African students became more receptive to the BCM's ideas. For Tsenase and his peers, the problem was that whites were oppressing Blacks:

> *When we went to town, we saw young people like ourselves going to better schools. Their schools were double-stories. We saw them riding buses to school when we walked. I lived in Sedibeng section … about 6 kms from Tembisa High. I walked to school. All of us knew that something was terribly wrong and [was] against us.*

During the 1970s, BCM ideas were propagated through organisations such as the South African Students Organisation (SASO), the Black Peoples Convention (BPC) and the South African Student Movement (SASM). Their main purpose was to instil in black people a sense of self and pride, affirming them not as a negation of the white norm, but as complete beings with human dignity and worth. Tembisa had a fair share of activists who supported the Black Consciousness philosophy. Ralph Mothiba, who later headed Tembisa High, was in the BPC; according to Greg Malebo, he "played a role in shaping our political thinking. During the history lesson, we'd talk about Kwame Nkrumah, African unity, Patrice Lumumba".

The BCM's influence filled black students with a sense of pride about who they were. Tsenase observed that "there were songs like *tswang-tswang le bone ngwana o tshwana le lekhalathi* (all come out and look at our child. She looks like a Coloured). We asked ourselves, why do we think to be Coloured is more important than what we are?"

The BCM's influence on students in Tembisa also made them aware of the political situation prevailing in the country. In the words of Tsenase:

> *I remember that when we went to town, we had to carry a pass. Even during school holidays. We knew that at the railway station there were escalators for Blacks and for whites. We saw all those things. When we were together during school breaks and at youth clubs, we would ask ourselves 'why didn't our parents fight off this apartheid system'?*

Patrice Lumumba 1960. Tembisa had a fair share of activists who supported the Black Consciousness philosophy. Ralph Mothiba, who later headed Tembisa High was in the BPC; according to Greg Malebo, he "played a role in shaping our political thinking. During the history lesson, we'd talk about Kwame Nkrumah, African unity, Patrice Lumumba". (Creative Commons)

It was against this background, and the influence of the BCM, that youth felt that it was their responsibility to oppose the apartheid system.

Youth clubs in churches also provided an organisational home and platform for conscientisation of young people in the township. They were established to keep young people away from trouble, but in fact they acted as vehicles that would help shape their political consciousness. As Mongezi Maphuthi, a former student at Tembisa High, put it:

> *We had a youth club at eNdulwini in the Roman Catholic Church under Deacon Nyathi. I was the secretary of the youth club and Sipho Kubeka was the chairman. We had people like Mpikayipheli Figland. I remember at one stage we went to St. Peter's… debating about something. They asked 'who would we consider as a person emulating Jesus Christ in the whole world?' I remember citing [Steve] Biko'*

Afrikaans and the students' demonstrations

By the time the NP government passed the decree that Afrikaans was to be used as a compulsory language, together with English, in African schools, high school students in Tembisa were politically conscientised and ready to oppose the government. The imposition of Afrikaans led to a high failure rate at Tembisa High. In 1975 they began to critically question the use of Afrikaans, and to weigh its benefits for their future careers. Tsenase again:

> *Look, I grew up in the Free State. So Afrikaans was not a problem. But I think I could decipher that to be able to do things in Afrikaans was not beneficial. We understood very well that Afrikaans is our language as South Africans and it has nothing to do [with what was happening] across the borders.*

Echoing Tsenase, Malebo remarked: "It was not an international language".

June 17 in Tembisa

To express their dissatisfaction, on 17 June at 10am, students from Tembisa High marched to Boitumelong Secondary, carrying placards saying, "Away with Afrikaans". The police barricaded the road and this disrupted the march. They tear-gassed and unleashed dogs on the students. Chaos ensued. The students vented their anger on everything they saw as apartheid symbols, such as the beerhalls dotted throughout the township.

The police shot and killed some of the demonstrators, and the mood changed from peaceful protest to confrontation. Students' demands went beyond the issue of language. Now they demanded the abolition of Bantu Education and apartheid in general. Many more students were arrested. Figo Madlala and Brian Mazibuko were found guilty and sentenced. They spent their incarceration on Robben Island. Others fled the country to receive military training in exile from the ANC and PAC's military wings.

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HUHUDI: students, civics and a struggle against forced removals

By **Lopang Victor Molokwe**

THE HISTORY OF RESISTANCE TO apartheid in South Africa is frequently described through the narrative of major cities such as Alexandra, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Durban, to mention a few. The 1976 Soweto uprising is a good example. But beyond these well-known cities, there were villages and townships whose history was just as crucial to the larger liberation effort.

One such location is Huhudi, a Black township near Vryburg in present-day North West Province. During the late 1970s and 1980s, this township became a focal point of organised resistance to forced removals, poor living conditions, high rents, and political oppression.

What distinguished the struggle in Huhudi was the way youth activism became closely tied to wider community struggles. In Huhudi, students were part of a larger campaign that included parents, workers, civic leaders, and to a lesser extent, white and Indian businesspeople opposing forced removals into the Bophuthatswana homeland. Despite Vryburg's historical importance, very little has been written about it.

Known as the "Texas of South Africa", Vryburg's long history of cattle farming established its political and economic significance. This helps to explain why the current North West Province is still one of the country's key beef-producing regions.

Building a single movement

Understanding the history of Vryburg in the late 20th century is greatly aided by the comments of one Huhudi inhabitant. In an interview, Thandiwe Margaret Gaonose clarified that student complaints had an impact on a larger Huhudi community group and that the forced relocations caused a broader community reaction. Civic leaders, parents, business owners, students, and regular citizens came together to form a single movement because of this common problem.

Youth activism became inseparable from wider community engagement. This is what made the struggle in Huhudi distinctive.

Original poster from the 1970s. *In 1970, the Department announced that Huhudi people would be relocated to Pudumong, a village in the Bophuthatswana homeland, around 55 kms outside Vryburg.*

Huhudi and forced removals

By the 1970s, Huhudi had become a growing Black township, managed by the Northern Cape Administration Board. Strict racial legislation and physical segregation were used to manage it. Due to a lack of political and civic structures, apartheid practices in the area were mainly unchallenged, leaving its population under continual administrative control. This made it possible for segregationist policies to function with little opposition, subjecting residents to persistent administrative and social control.

At the same time, the Department of Cooperation and Development was increasingly threatening to force Huhudi inhabitants to leave. By this period, they had already spent more than 14 years living under uncertainty about whether they would be removed. In 1970, the Department announced that Huhudi people would be relocated to Pudumong, a village in the Bophuthatswana homeland, around 55 kms outside Vryburg. Apartheid government officials said that Huhudi was overcrowded and poorly planned and that the land was needed for expansion of Vryburg. In reality, forced removals in Vryburg formed part of the apartheid strategy of removing Black residents from towns, relocating them to peripheral spaces.

To compel evictions, the apartheid administration implemented a "housing-freeze" policy in Huhudi. Residents were forbidden to build new homes or renovate old ones. Living circumstances deteriorated as a result. Living in Huhudi during this time, according to activist Darkey Africa, was "veritable hell", surrounded by "darkness of despair". Lucas Mangope, the then president of Bophuthatswana, supported these removals.

Relocations were welcomed by a few Huhudi inhabitants, particularly backyard dwellers and tenants who did not own homes. They would at last have their own homes. However, many residents feared losing their urban rights, being subjugated by Bophuthatswana's labour bureaus, having to pay excessive rents, commuting great distances for jobs, and having their families destroyed. Because trade unions were prohibited in Bophuthatswana, Huhudi working residents were also worried about losing their organisation and protection.

Organisation grows

Over time, opposition to the removals grew. The Vryburg Community Council voiced concerns to government, and Piet Koornhof, then the Minister of Cooperation and Development, received a petition signed by more than 1,000 Huhudi residents, protesting evictions. The government replied that the removals would go on regardless. Even though the petition was unsuccessful in stopping the removals, it was a significant turning point, because locals understood that broader community mobilisation would be required to overthrow apartheid practices.

One element of this turning point occurred in 1983, during a boycott at Bopaganang High School that lasted more than two months and led to the detention of 34 students. Amongst other things, students demonstrated against inadequate facilities, physical punishment, and shortage of textbooks.

Leaders in the community were also detained for allegedly inciting students to rebel against the integration of Huhudi into Bophuthatswana. In the early 1980s, this boycott gained momentum and changed Huhudi's political landscape. It promoted more community involvement and pulled students into more extensive political participation.

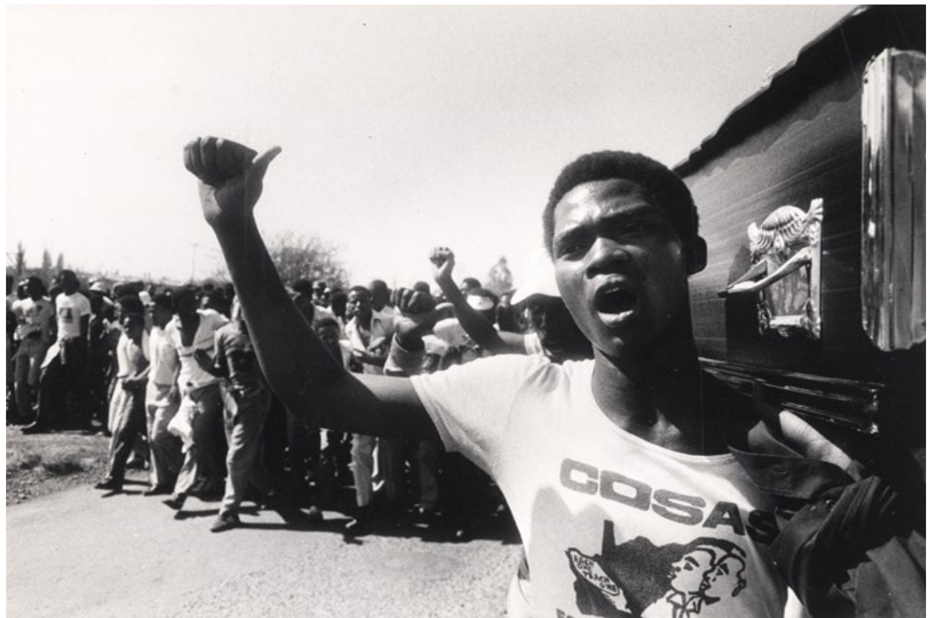
Without acknowledging the crucial role that women played in maintaining resistance, the history of Vryburg and its district would be incomplete. Thandiwe Margaret Gaonose described how parents, particularly mothers and young people, arranged late-night gatherings at her home to talk about ways to prevent forced removals. Because Vryburg Police or Special Branch police frequently sent their informants to eavesdrop on activists, these gatherings were conducted in an atmosphere of continual anxiety. White people, who frequently targeted those who were 'poor', also engaged in this behaviour. They constantly pressured young people to attend these gatherings in order to spy, in exchange for cash for food and clothing.

Connecting with the broader struggle

According to Thandiwe, Huhudi parents permitted their 'sons' to attend meetings in other locations, such as Johannesburg and Kimberly, in order to socialise. In fact, young people from Huhudi travelled to other locations hoping to learn new techniques that they could use and integrate with their elders (or, more accurately, Huhudi residents) to resist forced removals. In the early 1980s, the National Party government faced nationwide anti-apartheid demonstrations, organised by civic associations and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) under the United Democratic Front (UDF).

According to Thandiwe, these trips to neighbouring towns and cities were crucial in forming the organised youth and civic movements that subsequently developed in Huhudi and Vryburg. The Huhudi Youth Organisation (HUYO), which organised youth around community and educational challenges, was born out of this. Soon, the Huhudi Civic Association (HUCA) was also established, and grew to become one of the most powerful civic groups in the area.

HUCA was guided by the motto "Through Unity in Participation". It focused on improving living conditions in Huhudi and campaigned against increased rents. It encouraged residents to work peacefully in resisting forced removals and other forms of oppression associated with apartheid government policies.



In the early 1980s, the National Party government faced nationwide anti-apartheid demonstrations, organised by civic associations and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) under the United Democratic Front (UDF). (Photo: Paul Weinberg)

HUCA's formation transformed Huhudi politically. The township, once marked by fear and silence, became a centre of organised resistance. Public meetings and rallies attracted large crowds and connected Huhudi to national anti-apartheid organisations led by the United Democratic Front (UDF). One rally included speakers from the Soweto Youth Congress, COSAS, South African Council of Churches, Black Sash, Kudumane Youth Unity, and HUYO, amongst others.

HUCA also formed different committees to support the community. These included the Detainees' Parent Support Committee, formed after the student arrests during the Bopaganang boycott. Other groups included anti-removal committees, and worker organisations such as the General and Allied Workers Union. This demonstrated how resistance in Huhudi quickly spread across workplaces, schools, and inside the communities.

A victory against forced removals

The growing strength of organised resistance eventually forced the apartheid government to respond. On 15 October 1984, Gerrit Viljoen, the then Minister of National Education, announced that forced removals from Huhudi had officially been halted. This reprieve, however, did not end political repression. Instead, it led to new realities that came to shape the socio-political landscape of Vryburg during the mid-1980s. Ordinary residents, civic and youth activists in Huhudi faced arrest, torture, assault, and even killings from the vigilantes known as Inkatha. They worked closely with Vryburg Police/Special Branch police and some of the Community Council members. No vigilante or Community Council member would be arrested. Testimonies later presented before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) described brutal assaults carried out against HUCA and HUYO members. These attacks showed how seriously the apartheid government viewed the rise of organised resistance in Vryburg and its impact in undermining apartheid authority.

The "story" of Huhudi is much larger than just a local dispute over forced removals. It is a story of how women, men, students, youth, and civic leaders, united to challenge apartheid policies in a small but historically, economically, and socio-politically important township. It shows the important role of Huhudi in the demise of apartheid rule. Through organisations such HUYO and HUCA, the people of Huhudi contributed meaningfully to the wider struggle that eventually weakened the apartheid system across South Africa.

Lopang Victor Molokwe is a South African socio-medical historian working on African health systems, resistance, Western medicine, and animal disease history. His paper, which tries to tell the full story of Huhudi, will appear in the upcoming special issue *Bophuthatswana at 50: Reassessing Histories, Resistance, and Contemporary Resonances.*

THE FORGOTTEN UPRISING IN TEMBA, HAMMANSKRAAL

By **Precious Mashaba**

ON 21 JUNE 1976, Hammanskraal-Temba witnessed one of the most significant moments in its history, when students took to the streets in solidarity with the 16 June Soweto uprising. The protests in Temba demonstrated that the impact of the uprising extended far beyond urban townships. Rural and peri-urban communities were also politically mobilised, even though their experiences have often been overlooked in mainstream histories of 1976.

Recovering these histories is important not only for correcting the historical record, but also for recognising the role ordinary young people played in resisting apartheid across South Africa. The experiences of students in Temba remind us that the struggle against apartheid was never confined to a single township or city. It spread through classrooms, communities, and rural spaces that are too often left out of mainstream narratives.

Fifty years later, the voices of these students still matter. Telling their stories ensures that the geography of resistance is remembered in full.

It is possible that the police in Hammanskraal did not want to experience student demonstrations similar to those that had occurred in Soweto and elsewhere throughout the country. So they arrived prepared to quell any disturbance that might occur. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

Remembering 21 June 1976

> *The reason…we decided to burn the school down after what happened in Soweto: i rile ge re bula kuranta, rere! (ge rere). Ra kereya gore maobane ne go nyewa daa ahh le rena rae sosa! (When we opened the newspaper and discovered what happened in Soweto the week before, we decided to start!).*

Students at Kgetsi ya Tsie high school started their morning in their normal fashion: preparing themselves for assembly and catching up with their peers. Before the assembly bell rang, some of the students were reading a newspaper article on the Soweto uprising. When the assembly bell rang, they gathered in the school's assembly to listen to their principal, Mr Sono, and teachers. However, after the assembly, students refused to go to their classrooms. That is when the decision was made to create chaos. Peter Mampane and Isaac Moadira Thage were amongst this group.

According to Isaac Thage, the burning of the school was not a planned thing; it was a spontaneous decision. After the students' refusal to go to class, one of the students yelled, "staffroom!" Then another student retorted, "I have a box of matches with me". The rest of the students ran to the staffroom.

As this happened, the teachers watched from a distance. One of them called the police. On high alert, the police quickly arrived at the scene, forcing students to scatter in groups outside the school. But the spirit of protest was still in the students, who ran amok and looted and burned Temba Bakery. Another group of students decided to march to other schools in the vicinity to encourage them to join them in the protest. That's how students from Kgetsi-ya-Tsie high school ended up in Ratshepo High School.

The protest spreads

The morning of 21 June started normally at Ratshepo Middle School, with students lining up for their assembly, taking their classes, and doing their school activities, like class work and hand work. In the afternoon, the situation began to change. There was confusion when the students from Kgetsi ya Tsie High School arrived. They didn't enter the school's premises but stood outside, looking in through the fence, facing the Ratshepo students on the other side.

Even though the students from Kgetsi ya Tsie did not show any threatening signs, coming to the fence quietly, their presence was enough to scare off the principal, Mr Ramalepe. He drove to the Hammanskraal police station, 3 kms from Ratshepo. 15 minutes later, the school was surrounded by police cars. One of the former students, Josias Moshonga Rangwashe, explained that, when the police came in, they took all of the students out of their classrooms, and made them parade.

It is possible that the police in Hammanskraal did not want to experience student demonstrations similar to those that had occurred in

Soweto and elsewhere throughout the country. So they arrived prepared to quell any disturbance that might occur. The manner in which the police conducted themselves shocked the students. In the words of former student Rangwashe:

> *They displayed a certain degree of power which was disgusting, and I disliked it. What came to my mind was: 'Will this come to an end? Will we ever win the war?'*

The student protests in Temba were not isolated incidents. Across Hammanskraal, students mobilised against Bantu Education and apartheid repression. In Mathibestad, for example, around 200 students from Sekitla High School were detained for several months following protests linked to property destruction. Newspapers later described how "200 pupils [were] crammed into just two cells", highlighting the harsh response of the apartheid state towards student resistance.

Not just Soweto

Among the leading figures was Titus Kotsoe, who later fled into exile after enduring constant police harassment and surveillance. He only returned to South Africa in 1993, following the unbanning of liberation movements and the release of Nelson Mandela. Stories such as these show that the influence of the Soweto uprising of 1976 reached far beyond famous urban centres like Soweto.

This is why telling Temba's story is so crucial. By centring Temba, we show that the 1976 uprising was not confined to urban uprisings. Rural townships like Temba also bore the brunt of apartheid education policies. By writing these stories, we recover the full geography of resistance, ensuring that Temba's place in 1976 is not lost in broader narratives. This story not only shows the effects of June 16 and Bantu education effects on students in Temba, but in broader Hammanskraal, since schools like Ratshepo Middle School and Kgetsi ya Tsie high school were attended by students from surrounding areas, such as Surruman and Majaneng.

Educational conditions under Bantu Education

Hammanskraal schools in rural areas such as Suurman were marked by overcrowding, limited infrastructure, and severe resource shortages. This often resulted in the implementation of platoon systems that reduced teaching time and compromised learning. By 1964, over 50% of Bantu schools had adopted the platoon system, reducing teaching time and increasing teacher workload. Overcrowded classes, often reaching 70 students, undermined effective teaching, contributing to poor academic performance, rising dropout rates, and deepening educational inequalities. Budgetary inequalities further worsened these conditions, with significantly less funding allocated to Black students than to their white counterparts.

Oral testimonies reveal that these structural issues were compounded by everyday struggles, including poverty, lack of food, and limited access to basic necessities. This affected students' ability to fully participate in schooling. In addition, corporal punishment was widely practiced and contributed to a hostile learning environment. Students were frequently punished for circumstances beyond their control, such as the inability to afford school uniforms or fees.

Rangwashe, recalling corporal punishment during his school days, remarked:

> *The Bantu Education system did not encourage students to get to love school, because of the beatings; and you are being taught by teachers who went through the very same system, who thought that this kind of treatment was normal: it's ok to beat up someone's child. They didn't see a problem. And when the teachers walked by the students' homes, they would encourage parents to beat their children up, beat them up too much so they are able to listen in class. This gave the teachers support for beating the children, because they knew a parent would want their child to learn and listen in class. Then, how does this encourage learners to keep going to school? Back then teachers did not explore how they could make their teaching better for their students.*

In addition, aspects of the curriculum itself contributed to student dissatisfaction. Subjects such as agriculture, which were compulsory in many schools, were perceived by students as reinforcing a labour-oriented education system. For some, this subject symbolised Afrikaner dominance, as it appeared to prepare black students for manual and farm labour rather than broader opportunities. These conditions discouraged school attendance, increased dropout rates, and shaped negative perceptions of the education system. Rather than fostering learning, the system created an environment of fear, exclusion, and frustration. Taken together, these experiences highlight how the impact of Bantu Education extended beyond policy into the everyday lives of students, forming an important backdrop to the grievances that later found expression in the student uprisings of June 1976 in Temba.

The Bantu education system did not encourage students to get to love school, because of the beatings; and you are being taught by teachers who went through the very same system, who thought that this kind of treatment was normal: it's ok to beat up someone's child. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

Precious Mashaba is an MA student at the University of Johannesburg.

A SERIES OF BROKEN PROMISES:

the state of education in South Africa 50 years after 1976

By **Itumeleng Mothlabane**

FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE YOUTH OF 1976 took to the streets, resisting the Bantu education regime, South Africa remains confronted with appalling learning conditions, and uncomfortable questions about the value and purpose of education.

The students of the Soweto uprising were not just rejecting Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, but an entire political system designed to deny Black children dignity, equal opportunity, and a chance at a better life. Today, although apartheid laws have fallen, the education system continues to reflect the deep inequalities already displayed across South African society.

Race, class, home language and geography continue to be key determinants of the type of education that South African learners receive. Schools in marginalised communities continue to have poor infrastructure, a shortage of teachers and textbooks, and disruptions to the scholar transport and school nutrition programmes.

Despite this, the Government of National Unity keeps deprioritising education by implementing budget cuts. And it fails to enforce timeous consequence management in instances where there is evident misuse of public funds earmarked for education, and continuous poor performance by officials.

All this is a deep betrayal of the youth of 1976 and generations of young people to follow, whose dream of quality and equal education in South Africa remains unfinished.

Through various social policies and legislation, the democratic government made important gains for education after 1994. In 2025, the Department of Basic Education reported a 97% school attendance rate for all learners between the ages of 7 and 17. This is a major improvement in access to education.

Yet access alone has not translated into a dignified schooling journey that guarantees quality education. Only 59% of learners who started Grade 2 ten years ago made it to matric in 2025. Recent studies have shown that in South Africa, rural areas experience significantly higher learner dropout rates than urban areas. There is also an admissions crisis in urban provinces that continues to keep learners out of school for prolonged periods of time, resulting in missed teaching and learning. This crisis particularly affects learners with disabilities—poor Black learners—and these are already people who desperately need education to transform their lives.

At Good Hope Primary in Cofimvaba, parents started building toilets in November 2025 for the school's 200 learners, who are currently using broken pit toilets or the bush. Poor schooling conditions also threaten both the physical and mental health of learners. Under apartheid, learners faced direct violence from the state. Today, many learners face violence from the state in different forms. (Photo: Nombulelo Damba-Hendrik/GroundUp)

> *My school has no fencing; animals roam around the yard during schooling hours. The roof is leaking and floors are dangerous for both teachers and learners. This situation is not motivating for us to come to school, especially because we cannot learn when it's too cold or raining.*
>
> *Saxola Rholo, Grade 10 learner*
> *Lukhozi high school*

A crisis of infrastructure

The state of school infrastructure in South Africa remains a profound indictment of the country's democratic promises. Lukhozi's story reflects the devastating realities many learners still face daily: cracked walls, leaking roofs, broken windows, holes in classroom floors, overcrowding, and a lack of electricity.

Eastern Cape is still reported to have 846 schools using pit latrines. Their MEC is claiming that it will take more than 10 years to fix the infrastructure backlogs in the province. Despite the Regulations, implementation has been painfully slow and marked by regression. The Norms and Standards were hard won through activism led by Equal Education; we secured binding deadlines for the provision of safe infrastructure, such as proper sanitation, electricity, perimeter security, and libraries.

However, subsequent amendments weakened these gains by removing the binding deadlines. For a lot of schools like Lukhozi, this regression represents not just a legal change. They continue to bear the human cost of delayed implementation, poor planning, and chronic underfunding. These are the learners who are expected to compete equally in national examinations.

A crisis of learners' health and safety

Poor schooling conditions also threaten both the physical and mental health of learners. Under apartheid, learners faced direct violence from the state. Today, many learners face violence from the state in different forms, including the absence of security that makes schools vulnerable to gangsterism, bullying, gender-based violence, drugs, and severe mental health pressures. The shortage of

educational psychologists results in more than 10 schools being allocated to one social worker. This creates backlogs for learners to access psychosocial support.

Equal Education has consistently argued that school safety is not simply about fences and security guards, but about creating environments where learners feel supported, valued, and protected.

The 2020 court judgement recognised access to food as a key determinant of the right to education. However, it is rather concerning that we have witnessed major disruptions in the NSNP programme in recent years.

The number of social grant recipient candidates who passed the 2025 NSC examinations decreased from 86.06% to 77.70%. Learners often carry the burden of poverty and instability into the classroom, yet the education system does not always provide the support needed to address these realities. Schools are not only centres of learning but, for millions of children, also spaces of care, nutrition, and safety.

As a parent and an SGB member in Luzuko primary school, I have been hearing for years that Department of Education doesn't have enough money to build a school for our children. They are in temporal structures that have been there since 1999; learners and teachers have been injuring themselves in these structures. These prefabs are unsafe, overcrowded and disease in our school spread fast. We have tirelessly engaged the Department of Education and we are concerned to learn about the SIU report that there are monies being spent on bogus schools.

Thembani Booi, SGB member
Luzuko Primary school

A crisis of austerity

Another major concern is the declining prioritisation of education funding. Equal Education has repeatedly highlighted how budget cuts undermine the constitutional promise of basic education. It is predicted that the school infrastructure budget will decrease by nearly R1.2 billion over the next three years, meaning an 8% decrease by 2028. This will result in the halting of ongoing projects to improve learning conditions. The amount allocated per learner has not been sufficient to cover the needs of learners; as a result, we see the poorest schools requiring parents to make contributions.

Year after year, poor and working-class communities are expected to accept underfunded schools, while inequality continues to widen.

A crisis of political will

The apartheid government was morally illegitimate and fundamentally oppressive, yet it often implemented its discriminatory policies with ruthless consistency and administrative discipline. Bantu Education, forced removals, racial segregation, and pass laws were systematically enforced through coordinated state machinery.

By contrast, democratic South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions and policy frameworks in the world. However, the current government frequently fails to implement or respect its own laws and policies, including the recent Basic Education Law Amendment (BELA) Act. Court orders on scholar transport, sanitation, infrastructure norms and standards, and school nutrition programmes are often ignored, delayed, or unevenly implemented.

Today's crisis is not caused by a lack of progressive laws, but by weak political will, poor accountability, corruption, and administrative failure

And there is a lack of urgency to remedy these issues. The Minister of Basic Education had promised to eradicate plain pit latrines by March 2025. But until today, there has been no public accountability for missing this deadline. The Eastern Cape MEC openly claims it will take another ten years to eradicate school infrastructure backlogs, while generations of learners continue to study in unsafe and undignified conditions. The appointment of figures like Zukisa Faku into the portfolio committee, despite serious public concern, reflects a political culture where accountability is treated as optional. At the same time, dysfunctional interdepartmental relations mean that education, public works, treasury and municipalities operate in silos, constantly shifting blame. Meanwhile, schools collapse.

A crisis of democratic governance

This is poor governance at the political level. But we are also seeing the steady weakening of democratic structures that are meant to guard education at the community level. School Governing Bodies (SGBs), which were meant to give parents and communities real power in schools, are increasingly undermined and sidelined. Equal Education's campaign on anti-corruption in schools attempts to revive community power in the governing of schools, in the spirit of the 1976 youth, whose resistance showed that education struggles are won through collective action.

It is unfortunate that our education system remains marked by inequality, unsafe infrastructure, budget cuts, and weak accountability. While progressive laws exist, poor governance, lack of political will, and weakened democratic structures continue to deny many learners a dignified and quality education. Through campaigns on school infrastructure, anti-corruption, school safety, scholar transport, and the National School Nutrition Programme, Equal Education continues to show the power of organised youth and communities in holding the state accountable.

The legacy of 1976 reminds us that meaningful change in education will require both stronger governance and sustained grassroots organising to ensure that every learner can access safe, equal, and dignified schooling.

March 2018. More than 150 students from Phillipi High School marched to parliament. "We are 52 students in one container [classroom]. The situation is making it difficult for us to learn." (Photo: Thembela Ntongana/GroundUp)

Itumeleng Mothlabane is the General Secretary of Equal Education.

Gen-Z: WHEN THE GOVERNMENT GOES RIGHT, WE SHOULD GO LEFT

By **Zolani Balekwa**

We belong to a generation that grew up in the shadow of a promise. The promise was democracy. The promise was dignity. The promise was that once apartheid ended, South Africa would begin the long journey towards justice, equality and shared prosperity. Our parents believed this promise because they had fought for it with their lives. Our grandparents believed this promise because they had suffered under the brutality of a racial capitalist system that treated Black life as disposable labour.

Reality betrays the promise

By 2026, the question that confronts Generation Z is not whether democracy exists on paper. The question is whether democracy has transformed the material realities of the majority of people. By 2026 we have learnt something very important: political freedom without economic transformation produces a fragile and unequal society. A country can have elections, a constitution and institutions of governance yet still reproduce the same patterns of inequality that defined its colonial and apartheid past.

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Wealth continues to be concentrated in the hands of a small minority, while millions of people struggle to survive. Youth unemployment remains among the highest globally. More than half of young people remain without stable work. This is not simply an economic crisis. It is a generational crisis.

Gen-Z is the generation that has inherited this contradiction. We grew up hearing about liberation heroes—Steve Biko, Chris Hani, Robert Sobukwe, Winnie Mandela, Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu and many others. They imagined a radically different South Africa, a country where land, education and economic power would belong to the people.

Neoliberalism made it worse

Yet when we examine the structure of our economy today, we see something very different. The economic foundations of apartheid were never fully dismantled. Instead, they were adapted into a neoliberal framework that prioritises market stability over social justice. The economic policies adopted in the late 1990s—particularly the shift toward market-friendly frameworks such as GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution)—marked a turning point in South Africa's post-apartheid trajectory. These policies were presented as necessary for economic stability and global investment. But they entrenched a system where the state gradually withdrew from its responsibility to provide strong public services and redistributive programmes.

A young Winnie Mandela. We grew up hearing about liberation heroes—Steve Biko, Chris Hani, Robert Sobukwe, Winnie Mandela, Lilian Ngoyi, Albertina Sisulu and many others. They imagined a radically different South Africa, a country where land, education and economic power would belong to the people. Yet when we examine the structure of our economy today, we see something very different. (Photo: Paul Weinberg)

By the 2000s and 2010s, the effects of this model became clearer. Public institutions were under pressure, inequality widened and communities in townships and rural areas continued to experience poverty on a massive scale.

For Gen-Z, in 2026, we are forced to confront the consequences of decades of economic policy choices. We have seen budget cuts, fiscal discipline and austerity measures, in the name of stabilising the national economy. These decisions often come with reductions in sectors that directly affect the lives of young people.

Austerity is not simply a technical financial decision. It is a political philosophy. It assumes that the state must reduce spending even when communities are struggling; that public services must shrink even when inequality is expanding; and that the market will somehow correct itself if government withdraws its presence. But the lived reality in many communities tells a different story.

When public funding is reduced, schools in working-class areas suffer the most. When municipalities cut budgets, it is township infrastructure that deteriorates first. When cultural and youth programmes lose funding, it is the young artists, organisers and community builders who lose opportunities to create alternatives to unemployment and social decay. This is why the political direction of the state matters.

When the government moves right, it prioritises market stability, corporate interests and fiscal conservatism over social transformation. The consequences are felt most deeply by the marginalised. In such moments, society requires a counter-movement that pushes in the opposite direction. That must come from the people and especially from the youth.

For Gen-Z, moving left is not about adopting slogans. It is about recognising the structural realities of our time. It means understanding that inequality is not accidental. It is produced by systems of power that determine who has access to land, resources and opportunity. The geography of South Africa still reflects the spatial logic of apartheid. In cities like Cape Town, the separation between wealth and poverty is physically visible. Wealthy suburbs occupy the most economically valuable land, while working-class communities remain concentrated on the margins.

An echo of Group Areas

Gentrification has become a defining urban process of the post-apartheid era. Neighbourhoods that were once accessible to working-class communities are increasingly transformed into expensive real estate markets catering to wealthier residents and global investors. As property values increase, long-time residents are pushed out through rising rents, redevelopment and the commodification of land.

For many communities it represents a continuation of spatial displacement. It echoes the logic of the Group Areas Act, where Black communities lost their place in the cities they helped build.

Woodstock, Cape Town. Gentrification has become a defining urban process of the post-apartheid era. Neighbourhoods that were once accessible to working-class communities are increasingly transformed into expensive real estate markets catering to wealthier residents and global investors. (Photo: Masixole Feni/GroundUp)

The fightback

Gen-Z has grown up witnessing these contradictions; how global capitalism intersects with local inequality. We have seen how technological advancement coexists with mass unemployment. We have seen how the language of democracy sometimes masks the persistence of structural injustice. But in 2026 we also know that young people are not passive observers of history.

Across the country, youth movements continue to challenge systems of inequality. From the #FeesMustFall protests that demanded accessible education, to grassroots organising in communities fighting evictions and land dispossession, young people have consistently demonstrated a willingness to question authority.

For Gen-Z, education is not simply about obtaining a qualification. It is about accessing the intellectual tools needed to transform society. Yet inequalities within the education system persist from primary school to university level. Schools in wealthy areas have vastly superior resources to schools in townships and rural communities. This inequality shapes the opportunities available to young people long before they enter the labour market.

Culture as a political force

Another lesson in 2026 is the importance of culture as a political force. Throughout South African history, art has played a crucial role in resistance movements. During apartheid, music, poetry, theatre and visual art became powerful tools for mobilising communities and exposing injustice. Cultural workers helped shape the consciousness of a generation.

Today, art continues to serve this function. Creative expression is not separate from political struggle. Poetry, storytelling, film and performance create spaces where communities can articulate their experiences and imagine alternative futures.

In townships across the country, young artists are building cultural movements despite limited resources. These spaces are laboratories of political imagination.

They allow young people to ask difficult questions:

- Why does poverty persist in a democratic society?
- Why does land remain concentrated in the hands of a few?
- Why are public resources shrinking while corporate wealth continues to grow?

These questions are acts of democratic participation.

What does going left mean?

When we say go left, what we are really saying is that we must constantly push toward justice. Going left means defending the idea that land should benefit the people who live on it. It means arguing that public education must be accessible and adequately funded. It means insisting that healthcare, housing and cultural development are not luxuries but fundamental rights.

But moving left also requires responsibility. It requires building institutions, organising communities and developing political literacy. It requires young people to study history, economics and social theory, so that our critiques are grounded in knowledge rather than frustration alone.

Gen-Z must become a generation that not only protests but also proposes alternatives. We must imagine new economic models that prioritise human dignity over profit. We must strengthen community networks that resist displacement and exploitation. We must build cultural platforms that nurture critical thinking and collective creativity.

Generational tasks

Every generation inherits unfinished struggles. The generation of 1976 confronted the brutality of apartheid education. The generation of the 1990s confronted the challenge of building democracy. The generation of #FeesMustFall confronted the inequality within post-apartheid institutions.

For Gen-Z, our struggle is the struggle for economic justice. It is the struggle to ensure that political freedom is matched by material transformation. It is the struggle to ensure that democracy does not become a ritual of elections while inequality deepens.

The future of South Africa will depend on whether our generation is willing to confront these realities honestly.

If the government moves towards policies that prioritise capital over people, Gen-Z must respond by building movements that prioritise people over profit. This is not a rejection of democracy; it is a deeper commitment to it. Democracy is not only about voting. It is about the continuous struggle to ensure that power serves the public good. History reminds us of one simple truth: when power drifts too far toward inequality, the people must pull it back towards justice.

If the government goes right, the people, especially the youth, must go left.

Zolani Balekwa is a writer, artivist, filmmaker and director of **Artivism Productions 24** whose work channels community resilience stories into poetry and film for community activism.

A FIERY BATON:

to the youth, we have organising to do, majita!

By **Noncedo Madubedube**

These are reflections from the first Mabaphil'ABANTU podcast, featuring Dinga Sikwebu, Sindisa Monakali and Yolanda "Bunny" Sewela. Mabaphil'ABANTU is a movement space dedicated to building community for activists and abantu, as we learn from their own attempts at justice. Listen on our YouTube channel: @MabaphilABANTU.

There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen. Lenin

THIS QUOTE HAS HAUNTED ME for years. It captures something that unnerves me about being young in South Africa right now: we live inside a liberated nation while feeling absolutely politically abandoned, not as sentiment but structurally. I can only hope that our own rupture is progressively organised and can be sustained for as long as it takes to meet true liberation.

Young people under 30 made up 54% of those eligible to vote in the last electoral cycle, yet less than a fifth of us were registered. We are expected to participate in civic duties, while decisions are made without us. We are ignored or labelled vigilante when we demand our rights. Meanwhile, tens of thousands join the millions in waithood every year, as the jobs bloodbath deepens. Not from laziness. From systemic political abandonment.

Our struggle is clear—our common enemy is capitalism and its neoliberal agenda: organise society for profit over people. It asks poor and working-class communities to tighten their belts now, and promises dignity later, once the markets stabilise, or once economic growth trickles down, like holy water, from the Sandton boardrooms.

That is why this anniversary cannot only be about commemoration. Memory without organisation is just performance. The class of 1976 did not risk their lives so we could reduce them to annual hashtags and carelessly curated nostalgia. I believe that the June 16 uprising was a rupture inspired by political imagination. Without romanticising their struggle, those actions were organised across local communities, and crossed borders for solidarity. It's our turn to accept the fiery baton.

On Mabaphil'ABANTU

Last week, Mabaphil'ABANTU recorded its first podcast. This is not a polished media product or an experts panel but a conversation; an offering and an invitation into what we are calling a political reflection space. A mantra for ABANTU, for collective healing and reckoning.

Mabaphil'ABANTU exists because activists and our communities need intentional spaces to reflect on our own attempts at justice. Spaces for strategic pause, as Freire understood it. Spaces for rest, for study, for radical joy. Spaces where people can think together before burnout becomes ideology. We are answering bell hooks' call: building love schools—political homes where reflection, care, contradiction and imagination are treated as necessary for struggle.

The conversation featured Dinga Sikwebu, a retired union organiser and lifelong justice seeker; Sindisa Monakali, a 29-year-old student, activist and scholar from Khayelitsha; and Yolanda "Bunny" Sewela, a 19-year-old student, former 'Equaliser' and education activist. What emerged between them was not consensus—I have been itching to witness what comes from true intergenerational conversation, because I truly believe that real movement building happens, also, in the contradictions.

The class of 1976 did not risk their lives so we could reduce them to annual hashtags and carelessly curated nostalgia. (Photo: Peter Magubane)

Urgency vs the long game

Dinga reflected on organising during and after 1976, warning against the politics of ultimatums. Not because urgency is unnecessary, but because movements built only on reaction eventually collapse under exhaustion. You must do the slow work of consciousness-building, convincing people to act collectively through their own political understanding and not emotional momentum alone.

Then Sindisa and Bunny interrupted that sentiment, respectfully. They argued that political ultimatums are exactly what this moment demands. What happens when institutions no longer respond to engagement? When our memorandums become ceremonial theatre? When young people are deliberately excluded from the mechanics of governance, while leaders keep asking for patience?

"We are tired of waiting", they said, in different ways, throughout the conversation. Tired of waithood. Tired of protest fatigue. Tired of speaking politely into systems that only respond when communities burn tyres or when we occupy campuses.

One of the most moving moments came when Bunny told Dinga: "I want to struggle with you... but on my terms". That stayed with me. Intergenerational organising cannot mean young people quietly taking the baton of exhausted institutions or tactics. Nor does it mean dismissing elders as irrelevant. It must mean collaborative building and solidarity, with young people insisting on their own political agency.

Sindisa spoke powerfully about rejecting xenophobia entirely, arguing for a Pan-African political imagination rooted in solidarity against our common enemy. Political and economic inequality is producing dangerous desperation worldwide. Poor and working-class people are being mobilised to hate one another, instead of confronting the systems that oppress them.

This conversation reminded me that we do, in fact, possess an arsenal. We know how to find each other beyond hegemonic politics. We are making community in our own way. We occupy a political culture where music, art, memes, love, fashion, grief, colloquial language and resistance travel across borders faster than institutions can contain them. Solidarity does travel—the Palestinian solidarity movement is but one example.

Reflecting on social media, Bunny acknowledged its limitations: that platforms cannot sustain movements alone, that algorithms can flatten politics into consumable aesthetics, and that outrage becomes content. But she also insisted that social media has expanded political consciousness. And she is right. The purple movement against gender-based violence and femicide in that moment, re- energised public discourse in South Africa. Survivors stand tall. Rage became visible. Silence is growing less. Thousands of women are reminded that they were not alone in their experiences, and this matters.

The task now is moving beyond just visibility towards organising against the big man aka capitalism, for a sustained struggle. How do we embed our version of justice into institutions, culture, economics and everyday life long after hashtags disappear? How do we build political forms capable of surviving beyond click baits and trends? How do we organise for the long run?

What to do with this fiery baton?

Over 508 parties have registered to contest South Africa's local government elections. More than 100,000 candidates for approximately 10,000 seats. Some call this democratic vibrancy. I am less convinced.

1985. The UDF Players present a play. *We occupy a political culture where music, art, memes, love, fashion, grief, colloquial language and resistance travel across borders faster than institutions can contain them. (Unknown Afrapix photographer)*

This local government election will see no outright winners, but we must make sure not to become collateral damage to political party interests.

Local government is where ideology becomes basic services. Every dry tap, every eviction, every broken library, every closed clinic, every piece of land left vacant while young people beg for opportunities is ideology presented as municipal priorities/objectives.

Some parties claim ideology is irrelevant and that service delivery alone matters. Nonsense. Service delivery is ideology. The Western Cape illustrates this: a province where comfort and mobility are carefully protected for those that have, while poor communities are criminalised and displaced. This is modern day spatial apartheid with excellent branding.

And here is what makes it worse: much of the actual money still sits in provincial and national coffers. Municipalities are expected to deliver housing, sanitation, clinics and spatial transformation while remaining financially dependent on higher spheres of government that are politically invested in maintaining that dependence. Local government is simultaneously blamed and structurally restrained. That is not accidental. It is designed.

An entire White Paper process is underway that could reshape local government financing and participatory democracy in South Africa. Yet where are young people in this conversation? Where is the public political education? Even calls to extend the deadline for participation have been refused. Once again, democracy risks becoming something administered to young people instead of built with them.

Some parties claim to represent the poor while embracing xenophobia. Others perform democracy publicly while operating internally through elite handshakes and closed boardrooms. Some reject basic income support for unemployed youth while claiming to care about inequality. Others market themselves as anti-establishment while openly endorsing authoritarianism and genocide in other regions.

Our voting choices are less than underwhelming. Still, I refuse to be hopeless. We must go out there and vote, but young people must also organise independently and permanently, outside of electoral cycles. Build political cultures rooted in accountability, transparency and community leadership.

This should not be a neutral movement, not apolitical and not easily captured. A movement capable of holding all political power accountable, regardless of the t-shirt. A movement undoubtedly rooted in progressive politics and intersectional in its nature; strong on international solidarity and practicing democratic participation from below.

Maybe the task of our generation is not to "become the next 1976", but rather to become the generation that accepts the baton and refuses to normalise capitalist greed and fascism. The invisible hand has governed long enough. The transformation of society is imminent, but not through one perfect uprising, or during one election; and certainly not through one charismatic leader. But through the long, unfinished, deeply human struggle that the class of 1976 placed into our hands 50 years ago and believed would inspire those who came after.

Noncedo Madubedube is a social justice organiser, movement strategist and founder of Mabaphil'ABANTU.

Amandla! June 16 competition

#TheChangeIWantToSee

For this special feature to commemorate 50 years since June 16, Amandla! ran a social media campaign. We asked young people to contribute writing and photos on the theme: #TheChangeIWantToSee.

Thanks to all those who participated. We publish here a selection of the contributions we received. We received too many excellent submissions to publish them all in this issue of the magazine. They include some wonderful submissions from a school in Ashton, W.Cape. We are not able to do justice to them in this issue, so we will publish them in the next issue of Amandla! We also received some videos which we will publish online.

Image by Kopano Mashike

Youth of 2026: do it for the kids

By **Kopano Mashike**

The youth of 1976 placed their bodies between oppression and the future. The question now is whether the youth of 2026 still believe the future is worth fighting for.

Fifty years ago, young people took to the streets and changed the course of history.

In 1976, thousands of Black school children marched against the apartheid government's decision to force Afrikaans as a language of instruction in schools through the brutal system of Bantu Education. But the march became about more than language. It became a rebellion against oppression itself. Against a government that had decided Black children deserved less, less dignity and opportunity.

Many of those children never came home and yet, they fought anyway.

Today, as we mark fifty years since the Soweto Uprising, I think about something said recently by mayoral candidate Lukhona Mnguni during an interview with Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh: "The future is getting younger". And he is absolutely right. But perhaps the truth is even deeper than that. The future was always young. It has always belonged to children. History has always shifted because young people refused to accept the world as it was handed to them.

That is why I often wonder what the youth of 1976 would think if they saw us now. Because although we are no longer forced to live under many of the legal injustices they fought against, we are still trapped inside the aftermath of apartheid. We live with unemployment, violence, alcoholism, corruption, inequality, and the continued psychological violence of being told directly and subtly that Black life is still worth less. And when something is repeated enough times, it begins to sound like truth, even when it is not.

What concerns me most is not us, but the children growing up inside this reality. The ones whose futures are sitting in our hands while we scroll past suffering, debate politics like gossip, and watch the collapse of our country as though we are powerless to interrupt it.

Sometimes I think we have accepted defeat collectively. We are disinterested collectively. Not angry enough. Not tired enough. Certainly not as fearless as the students of 1976. And that is terrifying. Because the tragedy of South Africa today is not only corruption or unemployment. It is also the slow death of imagination. We no longer know how to dream collectively. We no longer believe another world is possible. We survive, but we do not imagine. And perhaps that is the most dangerous thing any system can do to a people, convince them that resistance is futile before they have even begun resisting.

But despite this, I still believe change is possible. I just cannot imagine that change coming from anywhere outside of the arts and academia.

Academia gives language to our suffering. It reminds us that what we experience today is not accidental. It tells us that poverty in Black communities is not a moral failure but the aftermath of a deliberate political design. It teaches us that apartheid was not only about segregation but about engineering generations of economic exclusion and psychological inferiority. It reminds us that corruption hurts so deeply because many of the people now in power know exactly what injustice feels like, yet still choose greed over service. They eat from the pregnant cow and leave nothing behind for the generations still to come.

And then there is art which I believe is inherently political. It may not carry a gun, but it starts conversations. It documents memory. It mourns, archives, confronts power. It allows people to imagine a different tomorrow while interrogating the failures of today.

As Kitso Seti says in his debut album Sons of Perdition, "In the beginning we were homes". Art reminds us of that. It reminds us that before displacement, before land dispossession, before violence and survival, there was humanity. There was belonging. There were people who dreamed freely.

And there are still artists and thinkers among us carrying this work forward. The Tiisetso Mashifanes, the Iphupho L'ka Bikos, the Nomfundo Xaluvas, and the Kitso Setis of our

generation. People using art, research, theatre, music, archives, and scholarship to tell us where we are, how we got here, and how we might still find our way out.

The change I want to see is a South Africa that invests seriously in both the arts and education. A country that understands that songs, theatre, academic papers, community archives, poetry, documentaries, and storytelling are not luxuries but real survival tools. They are blueprints for liberation because no society can heal if it cannot first tell the truth about itself.

And finally, I want us to remember the children.

The ones we birthed, the ones we are raising, the ones inheriting the emotional, political, and economic consequences of our decisions.

I think of the children in overcrowded classrooms. The ones walking home through violence. The ones learning hunger before they learn algebra. The ones already being taught to shrink themselves before they have had the chance to discover who they are.

What kind of country are we handing over to them?

Because the youth of 1976 did not fight so that freedom could become a performance. They did not die for us to inherit a democracy where dignity remains a privilege. They fought because they believed the generations after them deserved better. And maybe that is the question we must ask ourselves fifty years later, *do we still believe the children deserve better?*

Do we still believe enough in tomorrow to fight for it?

I hope we do.

Because history has already shown us what young people are capable of when they decide they have had enough.

Coins in the soil

By **Boitumelo Mohlabane**

I am Boitumelo Mohlabane from Sekgakgapeng village in Limpopo, South Africa.

In my village, poverty is something we wake up with every day. Many young people grow up believing that dreams are too expensive. We see coins every day, but they are never enough to change our lives.

In this picture, I planted a small flower among coins in the soil. The coins represent the little money many families survive on. The dry soil represents hardship, hunger, and struggle. But the flower represents hope; the youth of South Africa.

Our parents and grandparents fought hard during apartheid so that we could have freedom today. Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." I believe the youth are that weapon. Even when we come from poor villages like Sekgakgapeng, we can still grow, just like this flower growing from hard ground.

Youth Day reminds us of the brave students of 1976 who fought for a better future during the Soweto uprising. They planted seeds of freedom for us. Today, it is our turn to plant seeds of change.

This picture is called *The Change I Want To See* because I dream of a South Africa where no child's future is limited by poverty, where young people rise from the soil of struggle and bloom into something beautiful.

The change I want to see

By **Lerato Mphirime**

I want to see a South Africa where hope is not passive. Hope is not sitting and wishing. Hope is waking up at 5am to work on something that might fail. Hope is starting again after you fail. Hope is refusing to let the state of the country become an excuse for the state of your life. The youth of 1976 did not have better conditions than us. They had less. What they had was clarity and courage. So my question to you today is this: What will you do before the next June 16th that you cannot take back? We cannot fix everything today. But we can fix one thing. One street. One skill. One young person. And if each one of us does that, then in 10 years, we won't be giving speeches about the change we want to see. We'll be living it.

Image by Sophie Dlamini

Image submitted by Sibongile Mncube

World peace by Lerato Maris

Crisis of unemployment

By **Moegsien Ismail**

With your job gone, you not only lose income; you also lose these psychological benefits, leading to deprivation and potential mental distress. This is so true in South Africa, where some unemployed people lose all inhibitions to scratch in bins to earn a living. Marriages and families break up because of a lack of income. (Photo: Bibiire 1 / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA4.0)

UNEMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH Africa has reached crisis proportions. At 43.7% (including discouraged job-seekers, who are clearly also unemployed) nobody can deny that we are sitting on a ticking time-bomb. Ignoring it is turning a festering wound into a soon-to-be-amputated limb.

In 1982, Marie Jahoda, a British social scientist developed the Jahoda Latent Deprivation Model, to explain how unemployment affects individuals beyond just financial insecurity. She described unemployment as a serious contributor to mental illness, causing anxiety, stress, purposelessness, depression, shame, guilt and apathy. Employment, she said, meets five essential needs: time structure, social contact, shared goals/collective effort, status/identity and regular activity.

With your job gone, you not only lose income; you also lose these psychological benefits, leading to deprivation and potential mental distress.

This is so true in South Africa, where some unemployed people lose all inhibitions to scratch in bins to earn a living. Marriages and families break up because of a lack of income. The unemployed take to alcohol and other vices for a temporary reprieve from their daily hardships. Societal problems range through crime, health, mental health, gender-based violence, gangsterism and alcohol and drug abuse, to name but a few.

Youth and women bear the brunt when it comes to unemployment; more than 60% of our youth are unemployed.

Government is responsible

Government policies are mainly the cause of this high unemployment rate, although the legacy of apartheid is also a contributing factor.

Unemployment is a structural problem, and as long as the economy does not grow, unemployment will remain high. Economic growth, however, does not always translate into benefits for the poor and does not always create jobs, because the prime objective of business is profit, not the creation of employment.

Neoliberal policies of the South African government, starting with Gear in 1996, created this roller-coaster ride. The liberalisation of trade that came with Gear flooded our markets with cheap textile imports from China. Capitalists are not patriotic, and the local bunch rushed to bring in the cheap imports which devastated our local textile industry. Economic growth and huge profits for the commercial sector, but totally destructive for the textile manufacturing sector. The result was factory closures and the loss of thousands of jobs. Capitalists in the textile industry could easily move on, diversify into other industries or find new business opportunities. But for the millions of workers, it is a totally different story.

Neoliberalism is an economic ideology, influenced by free market ideologues like Milton Friedman. It emphasises free-market principles, deregulation and reduced government intervention in the economy. This is at odds with South Africa as a developing nation. It reinforces the old wealth and financial patterns of colonialism, apartheid and capitalism. Economically, we are held in the stranglehold of the West, which controls trade and the global economy, and makes all the rules.

The South African government is forever trying to attract foreign direct investment and put in place policies and programmes that will get multi-national corporations to invest. Like our local capitalists, the multi-national corporations only have an appetite for mega profits, and as we have seen, will desert our economy at the earliest threats to their profit margins. They also want to dictate to our country the terms of their economic engagement.

We have witnessed some multinational car manufacturers relocating to other countries, where they believe they can make bigger profits, and some steel manufacturers, like ArcelorMittal, also indicating that they will close soon, putting thousands of jobs at risk, swelling the ranks of the unemployed.

Corruption, mismanagement and government incompetence also play a big role in driving away investment, and causing unemployment. All of these factors played a huge role in load shedding and the massive increases in electricity prices, and weakening the rand, putting a premium price on fuel; these are all factors driving up the cost of doing business in South Africa. The higher the cost of doing business, the less appetite business has to spend on wages, which they in many cases regard

as a necessary evil. At the slightest provocation or opportunity they will off-load their workforce.

Unemployment destroys society

Stats SA's Social Profile of South African Youth 2014-2024 flags poverty, crime, education and the labour market as key issues shaping youth in South Africa. It identifies youth unemployment as a major driver of crime among youth, decrying the fact that only 27.7% of youth are employed. The Western Cape, KZN and Eastern Cape, regarded as youth-heavy provinces with high unemployment rates, also have high murder rates and violent crimes. The Eastern Cape had a murder rate of 63.5, the Western Cape 61.1 and KZN 52.2 murders per 100,000 in 2023. Over 55,000 youths, aged 14-25, are imprisoned in South Africa: 9,000 for economic crimes and 16,000 for aggressive violent crimes.

Deploying the army is only a stop gap solution, and, in our experience, the problem will persist once the army is withdrawn.

Unemployment and poverty contribute heavily to health issues like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and other lifestyle diseases. The World Health Organisation (WHO) emphasises that these diseases (cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases) are largely preventable through modifications in diet, physical activity, and reduction of tobacco and alcohol.

Many of these diseases are preventable and the government is spending a lot of money on treating the symptoms, not the diseases itself. We know the cause of these diseases are not eating properly, not exercising, and substance abuse. We also know the root of these diseases lies in poverty, unemployment, access to proper programmes and tools, and lack of knowledge. If the government is prepared to properly tackle these issues, it can massively reduce its budget of R82.6 billion over the next three years for drugs for treating non-communicable diseases.

Poor and unemployed people have to buy the less nutritious R15 loaf of bread, rather than the R30 and R40 healthier variants. Poor people cannot afford the gym, and do not have the inclination to exercise, considering their heavy burdens. And because of such burdens, they are also more likely to engage in substance abuse like smoking and drinking, and more dangerous substances.

The poor and unemployed do not have the budget or tools for healthy diets and lifestyles.

Neoliberal policies of the South African government, starting with Gear in 1996, created this roller-coaster ride. The liberalisation of trade that came with Gear flooded our markets with cheap textile imports from China. Capitalists are not patriotic. (Photo by Ricardo Stuckert/PR. Via Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.)

The government must stop austerity measures that push more and more people into the ranks of the unemployed and onto the margins of poverty.

Revise the EPWP

The government must have a deep dive assessment of all EPWP programmes and overhaul or abolish them. At the moment they keep our people, including the youth, in bondage and perpetual slavery, working for slave wages. They get paid below the minimum wage and are not covered under the LRA and BCEA. In very few instances do they train our youth in new skills to empower them to find work.

Every year between 570,000 and 650,000 youth matriculate, 572,983 in 2023, 614,562 in 2024, and 650,000 in 2025. Those are only the ones who passed, because in 2025, 900,000 learners wrote the matric exams. And these numbers do not include the many drop-outs in primary and high school every year.

And did the almost 2 million learners who registered for matric between 2023 and 2025 find work? Work has to be found for them, but can our economy cope with such a high demand for jobs? How do we do this, year after year?

Declare an emergency

Government has to admit that it has a massive problem of unemployment on its hands and declare unemployment as a national emergency.

An unemployment rate above 40% is definitely a national crisis, and should be treated by the government as such. Unemployment should stop being marginalised, and be regarded as an important economic indicator, a labour market state that signals dysfunction and inefficiency. It should be treated as a socio-economic condition in need of urgent attention.

The government should partner with the organisations of the unemployed to find a solution to the unemployment crisis: organisations like the Back to Work Campaign (B2WC), Assembly of the Unemployed, Botshabelo Unemployed Movement and the Unemployed People's Movement, as well as trade union federations like Cosatu and Saftu. They should partner to develop programmes to continuously create permanent, decent and dignified employment.

Let's work together to make it our mission for future generations to not know the word and meaning of unemployment.

Moegsien Ismail is the Media Officer of Back To Work Campaign (B2WC), an unemployed workers' organisation, organising the unemployed in the broader Cape Town Metropolitan area, and a member of the Assembly of the Unemployed (AOU). B2WC especially advocates for the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) to be abolished, or to be reformed and not to be used by the City of Cape Town as a wage bill cost-cutting exercise.

The Labour Laws Amendment Bill is an attack on the working class

By **Campaign to scrap the labour bills**

THE LABOUR LAWS AMENDMENT Bill (LLAB), approved by Cabinet and currently before parliament, represents a major frontal assault on workers' hard-won rights. It is deepening the neoliberal restructuring of the labour market. The trade union bureaucracy participated in the negotiations on the LLAB in Nedlac, without the involvement and mandate of the working class. It also excluded the millions of workers who are not part of unions, especially precarious workers.

The consolidation of the neoliberal labour market

Attacking the legal protection against unfair dismissal

There are several amendments that undermine the current legal protection against unfair dismissals:

- During the first 3 months of employment, workers can be dismissed without a valid reason and without a formal disciplinary hearing.
- The requirement to hold formal disciplinary hearings has gone. Workers only have to have a fair procedure. This could take the form of a "dialogue".
- Incapacity is broadened to include incompatibility, which can be a ground for dismissal.
- Workers cannot apply for an urgent court order to stop unfair retrenchment procedures. They can only challenge unfair retrenchment procedures after they are retrenched / dismissed, which could take years.

The sponsors of the proposed amendments say that to create jobs and grow the economy, workers' rights must be taken away. The result is that work will become more precarious and insecure.

Cheapening Labour

Wage agreements negotiated in Bargaining Councils will no longer be binding on an employer of a new business that employs less than 50 employees. In the engineering industry this will reduce the minimum wage from R66.93 per hour. to R30.23 per hour. It also undermines collective bargaining, and specifically industry bargaining.

The trade union bureaucracy participated in the negotiations on the LLAB in Nedlac without the involvement and mandate of the working class. It also excluded the millions of workers who are not part of unions, especially precarious workers. (Photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/Ground Up)

Codifying casualisation

Zero-hour contracts: this is one of the most damaging forms of precarious employment. A worker must be available for work but is not guaranteed any hours of work. They are at the beck and call of capital and their livelihoods depend on the dictates of the market.

The sponsors of the amendment argue that incorporated zero-hours contracts into the legal framework will protect these workers from exploitation and abuse. However, there is no effective provision for guaranteed hours. Employers must specify guaranteed hours in a contract, but the LRAB does not include any minimum number. And the employer has the right to cancel hours of work provided proper notice is given.

Gig workers: the drafters claim they are extending rights to workers who are not currently defined as employees—the so-called 'independent contractors' in the gig or platform economy, such as uber drivers and scooter delivery workers.

It is true that the LLAB defines these workers as employees. However, they only have certain rights: to form or join trade unions, to engage in collective bargaining, and to strike. They are also protected against some "automatically unfair dismissals". However they are not protected against other unfair dismissals. So, if an Uber delivery worker is pregnant, her services can be terminated and she will have no protection. They are also not protected against unfair dismissals for misconduct, incapacity or retrenchments.

This will be wielded as a deterrent against workers who want to form or join unions. In the context of widespread unemployment and poverty, workers are concerned about job security.

Attacking other workers' rights

Section 77 of the LRA is amended. At the moment, a union or a federation can get a certificate from Nedlac to call a socio-economic protest strike. The certificate lasts indefinitely. The amendment says that the certificate lapses after 24 months. After that, there must be a new application. It can take months, even years, to obtain a certificate because of the cumbersome bureaucratic processes of Nedlac.

Higher-paid employees (over R1.8m per year) are not able to seek re-instatement or re-employment for unfair dismissal case (unless it's an automatically unfair dismissal). They are only entitled to compensation, limited to an amount determined by the Minister, currently set at R1,800 000 per annum.

Limited concessions

In exchange for the deepening of labour flexibility and the erosion of workers' rights, the LRAB offers:

Improvements in severance pay, but with a catch

The minimum severance pay for retrenchment is increased from one week to two weeks for each completed year of service. However, this only applies to the future, not the past. Only years completed after the Act is passed will count. So older workers are not going to benefit.

Automatically unfair dismissal referred to arbitration, but only some

Automatically unfair cases for exercising of rights, pregnancy and unfair discrimination can be referred to either the CCMA/Bargaining Council for arbitration or the Labour Court. However, other automatically unfair dismissals must continue to be referred to the Labour Court. These include dismissals for: participation in or support for a protected strike; refusal to perform the work of a striking employee; joining a trade union; exercising rights; refusing to accept an employer's mutual interest demand; and making a protected disclosure.

Secret ballot for closed shop agreements

A trade union is required to conduct a secret ballot of workers covered by a closed shop agreement when:

- One third of the employees request the secret ballot, or
- Three years have elapsed since the closed shop agreement was signed or the last ballot was conducted.

If no secret ballot has been conducted after three years, the agreement automatically lapses.

This is one of a handful of amendments that represents a positive advance for workers. The amendment wants to ensure that unions with closed shop agreements still represent the majority of workers. However, not many workers are part of closed shop agreements.

Amendment to the National Minimum Wage Act

This is another positive concession. It says that a worker's wage in terms of the national minimum wage excludes deferred payments such as contractual bonuses and provident fund contributions. This is to rectify a judgement made by a Labour Appeal Court that included deferred payments into the calculation.

Though the amendment is positive, it merely re-asserts the initial understanding of the law.

Changes to parental leave and benefits

In 2025, the Constitutional Court said men must not be discriminated against with parental leave and benefits. So, according to this amendment:

- A worker (whether a man or woman) who is the only employed partner in the parental relationship, and who contributes to UIF, is entitled to take at least four consecutive months parental leave.
- If both parents are employed and contribute to the UIF, then they are collectively entitled to four months and ten days parental leave. They can agree to divide this between them.

However, these changes will not assist in the struggle against GBV or for gender equality. Patriarchy is still firmly entrenched and men are not yet socialised to deal with parental responsibilities. And four months leave at 60% of earnings is not enough. But women are now expected to share this. Equalisation of parental care between the partners is coming at the expense of women.

The drafters claim they are extending rights to workers who are not currently defined as employees—the so-called 'independent contractors' in the gig or platform economy, but they are not protected against unfair dismissals for misconduct, incapacity or retrenchments. (Image generated by AI).

Institutional changes

Expanding the functions of the CCMA

The CCMA will be able to assist a worker to enforce an arbitration award, including instructing and paying the fees of the Sheriff. It will also be able to regulate procedures more clearly, including con-arb processes, facilitation in large-scale retrenchments, compliance orders, and wage claims under the National Minimum Wage Act.

However, this expansion of the CCMA's functions comes on the back of budget cuts. The result is long delays in the processing of disputes, and a tendency to shift conciliations and arbitration online to the disadvantage of workers, especially workers in precarious forms of employment.

Meanwhile, the CCMA has become extremely conservative and pro-capital. Many of the commissioners now come from the business world. Others come from universities and are blind supporters of free-market ideology. Commissioners with a trade union background are from a labour movement that is highly institutionalised, bureaucratic and embedded in capitalism.

The politics of the amendments

These amendments are saying that economic development will take place once bosses have unhindered freedom to hire and fire workers. They are blaming workers for the stagnant economic growth. By doing this, they want to hide the real cause of unemployment and poverty—capitalism, and more specifically, monopoly capitalism. The small minority that owns and controls the South African economy appropriates the wealth created through the labour and sweat of workers. They are now sitting on this wealth and refusing to invest and create jobs.

They want to politically divide the employed workers and the unemployed, and also the employed from the middle class, especially small business owners. Their message is: it is the workers who are the problem. They have too many rights and are earning too much.

The Campaign to Scrap the Labour Law Amendments is calling for the scrapping of the LLAB and for a complete re-writing of all labour law in the interest of the working class—both the employed and the unemployed.

There was a court case up to the constitutional court in 2021. The judgment provided for rights to be recognised for minority unions. (Photo: Harvey Barrison / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0).

NUFAS: we are not a funeral cover union; we are a servicing union

Interview with **Vuyo Lufele**, NUFAS Deputy General Secretary

***Amandla!*:** You have been on quite a journey since you were Numsa's Regional Secretary in the Western Cape. Dismissed by Irvin Jim because you asked too many uncomfortable questions about how he was benefiting from the Numsa Investment Company. And some of it, I suppose, is a story of how difficult it is to set up a new union in South Africa. Please tell us the story briefly.

Vuyo Lufele: Since I've been out of Numsa, in my mind I had no other thinking than of building an alternative trade union. And it has been a long journey with other comrades across the country.

We started by trying to build a new union called the Metal, Mining and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (Mmawusa). But registration has proven to be a tough journey. I wish I will never go for registration again. Firstly, for you to register, the registrar expects you to have a bank account. But to open a bank account, the bank expects you to have a registration certificate. That's the first problem. Secondly, for registration you need to have paid up membership. But for employers to deduct subscriptions they expect you to have a registration certificate. That's another hurdle that you must climb over.

We then decided that we are going to start afresh and look for a strategic union that has a low profile but is registered. And we found the National Union For All Sectors (Nufas) and sat down with the General Secretary. Nufas was formed initially as the National Union for Call Centres of South Africa (Nucsa). In 2023, because of the demand from other sectors, the union opened its scope, and changed its name to Nufas. At the time they had about 2,000 members, and around 1,400 that were paying.

But it was not an easy task. It was difficult to trust us, because we are coming from this bad, bad history of our battles in Numsa. Particularly they were worried that there were ulterior motives. The President thought that I wanted to be the General Secretary. I was clear to the comrades; I came here because we want to build an alternative trade union We want to build Nufas to be a giant. Amcu came from Num. Today, Amcu is bigger than Num. And I'm here to build a trade union that can be even bigger than Numsa, the biggest union in South Africa.

But I know that the organisation is still small, still at a foundation stage. And therefore, from my side, I want to contribute in the administration of the organisation; that is my area of expertise. I see that the position of the Deputy General Secretary, which is vacant, is appointed by the NEC according to the Constitution. For me, I would appreciate that so that I can share my expertise with the General Secretary. They said, that's fine.

We came with about three or four companies that were paying and we said we want no salary from that. Once we generate more income, we can start with a stipend. Once you have got from 1-150 paying members, you must then qualify for R1,000. From 151 to 250, it must be R5,000. And from 251 to 350 it must be R10,000. From 351 to 450 it must be R15,000, and we say that must be our basic salary.

***A!*:** Now what happens if those 150 that I recruited, they now leave?

VL: Your stipend will also leave you. To encourage comrades nationally, because we've got 28 officials across the country, in W.Cape, E.Cape, North West, Mpumalanga and Sedibeng. We joined them last year, around May, and within a few months, in February 2026, we have pumped more than 3,000 members into the organisation, pushing it up to just above 5,000 members.

***A!*:** This takes me on to another question. In this country, we have what people call a majoritarian kind of orientation to our labour law. It favours majority unions. It was built like that in the 90s because of the desire to avoid the fragmentation of unions. We were in a period where we wanted to consolidate, so you didn't want to make it easy for people to set up new unions. But that was in a day when the unions had a progressive leadership. The problem is that now, when the union leaders have become a bureaucracy, it's very difficult to set up a new union, because majority unions block smaller unions from getting rights in companies. I remember when Cedric Gina, the Numsa President, left Numsa and started the Liberated Metalworkers of South Africa (Limusa); ultimately, he failed. And he had support from Cosatu. What is your experience now?

VL: There is that issue of majoritarianism, but there has been a breakthrough. The South African Correctional Services Workers' Union (Sacoswu), which organises in the army and in correctional services, was

competing with Popcru, the Cosatu affiliate. It was difficult for Sacoswu to find space. And there was a court case up to the constitutional court in 2021. The judgment provided for rights to be recognised for minority unions. These include Section 12 rights to have access to the workplace and Section 13 rights to deductions of union subscriptions. With those rights, you can build up your union from the inside.

However, the LRA also allows unions to reach a threshold agreement with employers. If they want to close the door once they are inside, then they will set the threshold. But now the level of organisation inside workplaces has dropped for a union, even if it's alone. Now you'll find that it is organising less than even 50% of the total workforce. So it's difficult for them to say to us we must first get to 50% when they are not even at 50%.

So now we are organising in Numsa workplaces. For instance, we have close to 800 members at Golden Arrow bus company. And we are pushing to be a majority.

A!: Are you also organising companies which were never organised before? And are you organising precarious workers? One of the big criticisms of unions over the years has been that they haven't organised precarious workers. Is Nufas organising them?

VL: We are doing both, in as much as we are still small. At this moment, we have very few companies that have been unorganised in our books. But they are coming slowly. Most precarious workers that we have now are cleaners. For instance, at Golden Arrow, as we organise the buses, you will find that there is a subcontractor of cleaners.

But most companies are the companies that followed us out of Numsa. For instance, there's a company called Technical Systems. Numsa had about 95 members. This company employs more than 300 workers. That whole 95 members of Numsa joined, and increased to 185 workers who joined from that company. And when we gave service to that company, they said, "You know what? For 13 years, we were with Numsa. For a few days you have been here and the change that you have brought. We can't believe".

A!: There is another minefield for any union. It's one of the things has brought Numsa down. The question of service providers. Contracts with service providers offer opportunities for corruption. They enrich a bureaucracy in the union at the expense of the membership. How are you managing to deal with that and keep that out of your union?

VL: We are still wrestling with that conversation. It was that experience with service providers that led to our dismissal from Numsa. We are avoiding it at all costs. It's not an easy thing, because we have no resources, and we know what they offer. And this funeral demand from workers can make us go crazy. We interviewed some service providers. Then we thought maybe we can do this thing internally: put certain funds away, rather than getting into the space of service providers. Firstly, it's costly for the organisation. Secondly, how safe are we? Because service providers, they are clever, they will first identify who's got power here that we can then visit that person alone.

I've been confronted by many service providers, but I declared to the comrades. While I was still suspended from Numsa, a service provider offered to keep paying my salary. I said, No, no, no, no, I'm on a paid suspension. All what we needed is assistance to establish this project. I can't work in that fashion. It's a difficult thing. And when you are alone, you see that's why many comrades fall into this trap.

It's something that we have not dismissed it, but we have to sit down and make sure that we try to close loopholes that may lead to us being corrupted.

A!: Of course the position you're taking makes you vulnerable, because somebody else is going to come up in the union at some point and say, I'll give you a funeral policy; this leadership has been refusing to give you a funeral policy.

VL: No, definitely. And that person is going to be a champ, because workers want that funeral policy.

We are organising in Numsa workplaces. For instance, we have close to 800 members at Golden Arrow bus company. And we are pushing to be a majority. (Photo: Husskeyy / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0).

I must say that NUMSA is gone. What these guys did, they dealt with all those that were anti-corruption and that were vocal, but who also had expertise of servicing. They are left with those who have got no capacity to service.

A!: I suppose I should have asked this question before. Given all this grief that you are suffering, given all these challenges that you are facing, what has driven you to do such a thing to yourself? What motivates you? What makes you want to do this very hard thing of building a new union in circumstances which are also extremely difficult?

VL: This may not be a simple answer, but I've gone through the experience of how workers are left so vulnerable, and how leaders have used the employed masses to enrich themselves. In Numsa, we have noticed that leadership only focused on building factions that will be close to them in order to enrich themselves. Comrades would be shouting socialism, only to find out at the end that workers have been used for individuals' enrichment.

And these people have become a majority in the trade union movement, leaders of that nature. And everybody who comes to the union will see this as a fashion — that in order to get something, you must be aligned to individuals that are corrupt in the organisation.

I must say that Numsa is gone. What these guys did, they dealt with all those that were anti-corruption and that were vocal, but who also had expertise of servicing. They are left with those who have got no capacity to service.

A!: What are the key differences between Nufas and a union that has failed, such as Numsa?

VL: At the centre, you must know that you are brought together by workers and their interest. Now the interest of workers is service, because at the point of production, when they are abused by employers, the first thing they think is a trade union. Once they get into a trade union, they must get what they deserve, which is service. We must be a fighting union that represent workers and their interest. It's not going to be easy. I have felt it myself, because we are of various capacities, but we must build that capacity.

Firstly, what has left the trade unions today is training of shop stewards. Today, everything is dependent on a union official. A worker can't move without a union official. And we must get rid of that. There must be training of shop stewards to a level of even going to conciliations and arbitrations. If we can bring that spirit, then officials will deal more with recruitment, general meetings and so on. So the organisation will be alive at a workplace, rather than only at the CCMA and bargaining councils.

Secondly, we must allow robust internal democratic debates in the organisation. We can't be suspicious of each other immediately. Thirdly, union leaders must comply with the union constitution, and worker control must become the key. Workers must not be undermined. They must be allowed to develop ideas of how they feel or they think.

A!: You said something in the beginning about this being the way to regenerate the trade union movement in South Africa from the state that it's in. And I think everybody sees that it is in a weak state, in terms of numbers, in terms of militancy, and in terms of organisation. So what is going to happen to the current big unions? Do you see a future where more militant unions like yours are going to grow up and eat their members, or are people going to work inside those unions to change them? How do you see that change taking place?

VL: That's a difficult one, and I know that it won't be an overnight change. We are not looking at joining any federation for now. If we join a federation, we will be forced to focus on a particular scope and merge with another union. Because there will be principles that are guiding a federation.

But we want to build a big, strong union that is opened, as this union is, to other sectors. If we can champion what we are championing, and attract more workers, they may come from other unions and join us, and we will make sure that we keep this culture of building. It's about bringing change.

The haves, the have-nots and the have-everythings

By **Rea Mmethi**

IN A TWIST OF BITTER IRONY, PHALA Phala billionaire President Cyril Ramaphosa stood in Parliament and quoted Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake" to accuse his opposition of indifference to the poor. He has dismissed critics of the NHI Act as "haves who don't want the have nots to benefit from what *they* have been having". This retort echoes the stance of other multi-millionnaire pro-NHI politicians and is designed to frame any criticism as a selfish defence of class privilege.

On the other hand, right-wing and liberal opposition has framed the NHI as a totalitarian socialist scheme lifted from the Soviet playbook. This rhetoric has dedicated itself to mobilising middle-class and white constituents on the basis of fear rather than evidence.

Cyril Ramaphosa addresses NHI Stakeholder Consultative Meeting. He has dismissed critics of the NHI Act as "haves who don't want the have nots to benefit from what they have been having". We must resist being dragged into a token battle between haves and have-nots, especially when it is instigated by the have-everythings. (Photo: GCIS, via Flickr, CC BY-ND 2.0).

ANC has given little clarity

In fact, very little has been said or done by the ANC government to inspire faith in the NHI. Between April 2024 and February 2025, the Department of Health spent R28m on an advertising campaign on highway billboards and social media. But it did little to clarify how the NHI would work or give South Africans workable information. Instead, the ads focused on establishing that healthcare is a fundamental human right, and appealing to citizens' sense of camaraderie and solidarity.

Most taxpayers still have no idea how much it would actually cost them to launch the scheme, what the different phases of implementation mean for them, or even when they can expect to see changes.

Opposition relies on misinformation

Equally damning is the red-scare tactics on the opposite end of the field. Opposition to the NHI has been led by the DA, Afriforum, FF+, the Free Market Foundation and other self-appointed 'defenders of freedom'. It has depended on misinformation to demand a similar blindness from its constituents. These organisations have put out statement after article proclaiming that the NHI is unworkable, unaffordable and unconstitutional. They claim that it threatens the future of the private healthcare sector, the autonomy of healthcare professionals and the financial security of taxpayers.

These baseless claims have persisted despite the Health Department's website explaining that private practices or hospitals will continue to exist as additional service providers that users can opt into voluntarily. In addition, the Constitutional Court has ruled that healthcare workers cannot be told where and where not to work. Regardless, this rhetoric has been especially effective in middle-class to upper-class circles, who have long been frustrated by the misuse of their tax dollars.

Meanwhile healthcare crumbles

While the moral ping-pong goes on, South African residents continue to suffer from a crumbling healthcare system. For most people, access to healthcare is either an exhausting and humiliating experience at the end of a snaking line, or an exorbitantly expensive one by way of a stinging debit order. The public sector is drowning:

- As of early 2025, there were over 27,000 vacancies in public hospitals—more than 2,000 for doctors and nearly 17,000 for nurses.
- In the Free State and the Eastern Cape, vacancy rates in hospitals go up to 28%.
- As it stands, South Africa has about 5 ICU beds per 100,000 people in the population, and every single day a community mourns a preventable death as a result.

Only 14.6% of South Africans are subscribed to a medical aid scheme, and yet in 2024, they still spent R43 billion in out-of-pocket costs. On average, annual beneficiary cover costs about R30,000, but that number spikes for anyone aged over 44 and peaks at R96,000 for those aged 85 and older. This effectively means that there are whole communities who may not afford the simple human leisure of growing old.

These problems require earnest discourse and accountability to resolve. The current rhetoric does more than simply obscure facts with click-baity, under-researched headlines. It has real sociopolitical consequences that are not even borne by those who utter the words from the comfort of their money-stuffed couches.

Accessible healthcare is an ideal worth fighting for, but it must come with solutions to the immediate failings of the system.

The NHI debate should be more than just a virtue-signalling tug-of-war for voters' brownie points. It should be an empathetic, practical assessment of the material conditions of real people, whose suffering is not merely ideological.

We must resist being dragged into a token battle between haves and have-nots, especially when it is instigated by the have-everythings.

Rea Mmethi is a South African word-weaver and Health Sciences student, who writes at the intersection of care, language, and socialist practice. Their work seeks to embed socialist ideology into everyday politics.

Even today, whilst the army is deployed, there are still bodies everywhere. Five people were shot just last night in Beacon Valley, for instance. Violence has increased to the extent that these gangsters are shooting indiscriminately at an entire family. (Photo: Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp)

The army in the townships

militarising the poor

Interview with **Henriette Abrahams**, Chairperson of the Bonteheuwel Development Forum

***Amandla!*:** Tell me a bit about the Forum. What do you do?

Henriette Abrahams: The Bontiheuwel Development Forum was started in 2018. We had lots of gang violence and lots of bodies on our streets. So we started street committees to patrol, focusing on gang violence, drug merchants and creating safe routes and passages for our children during this gang warfare. We mobilised, linked the politics to it, took on SAPS and government. We shut down in Cape Town in September 2019. Other communities came out, and it spread to Westbury and Eldos and other areas as well across South Africa.

Then we broadened out; we looked at safety, we looked at food security; we branched out, because we understand that these are systemic issues, into youth empowerment, women's empowerment, and psychosocial support work.

***A!*:** For people who don't know Bonteheuwel, just describe briefly what kind of a place it is.

HA: Under the Group Areas Act people were thrown out of areas such as District Six, and they landed up in Bonteheuwel, Hanover park, Manenberg. Bonteheuwel is a working class area. Originally it was built for 35,000 people. Today we have 85,000 people. So we have lots of overcrowding, we have lots of backyard dwellers. Of course, where you have such density, unemployment, poverty, and so forth, you will always have crime. We have overburdened infrastructure, because all these years they've never expanded on our public works. We have people sitting with drains that are overflowing, sewage in the yards and in the streets, floods. The infrastructure was never upgraded at all. And yet we are seeing Seapoint's boardwalk being upgraded today, as we speak.

We have your typical issues that any working class area would have, which is hunger, poverty, violence, unemployment.

***A!*:** Has the army been in Bonteheuwel since that announcement by the president?

HA: Yes. The army is here. This is not the first or second time that the army has been deployed to assist with gang violence. They are not physically deployed in the police precinct, like the Anti-Gang Unit. They are stationed somewhere, and then they hit certain areas. So you would have the army once or twice a week.

***A!*:** So they pop in and out. And when they're popping in, what do they do?

HA: They have joint force operations. SAPS and the army and metro police go to hot spots where gangs are, where there's killings. They search people that are walking on the streets. They search them on the street, and they also search drug merchants, and suspected and suspicious homes of gangsters or gang activity.

But there's a lack of intelligence-driven operations. For them to hit Bonteheuwel streets or Langa streets, without a proper intelligence plan does not make sense for me. It's a waste of money. R800 million, that's almost a billion rand, right? But if intelligence and police are compromised, as we are seeing today in the Madlanga Commission and the parliamentary committee, as well as politicians and government, then what is it that they are doing? What's the success rate going to be? Are they not set up for failure if we are already having a compromised police?

We really have a trust deficit between communities and SAPS and criminal intelligence departments. They continually undermine the intelligence that communities are sitting on, in structures or neighborhood watches or street patrols.

So, for instance, we've had shootings last night. We have the immediate information—we know these were the shooters, they ran that way, they pitched the gun that way. We know that if the police are looking for a particular gang member, then that gang member from our area would go and hide out in Woodstock, or in Mitchells Plain, where the others are, or even go and live on the Sea Point / Camps Bay strip as homeless people for a while, or run to informal settlements and hang out there, lie low.

That's the type of intelligence that I'm talking about. But even within our own precincts, there are police that we don't trust to give information to. Or we will only work with one particular police officer and not with a couple of them.

A!: What was the situation of violence and gang-related activities before the 1st April, before the mobilisation of the army?

HA: Even today, whilst the army is deployed, there are still bodies everywhere. Five people were shot just last night in Beacon Valley, for instance. Violence has increased to the extent that these gangsters are shooting indiscriminately at an entire family. You're sitting outside on a Sunday afternoon, playing dominoes or drinking beer. They shoot everybody that's sitting there. At first, the gangs used to just take out their rivals. Now they shoot everybody who is in the room. And they're going for headshots. The intention is to kill you in such a fashion that your family can't have an open casket.

A!: What has been the effect of the army's presence in Bonteheuwel?

HA: For me there's no effect. Like I'm saying, they pop in and out. If we see them twice a week, it's a lot. We don't see the difference; we don't feel safer, we don't see it, we don't feel it. As long as we have hunger, as long as we have poverty, as long as we have unemployment, we will always have crime. If the state does not put its resources and its energy into the root causes of crime and gangsterism and violence, we will forever have to deploy the army.

And they must stop militarising the poor. They come into our area. Many people are complaining of innocent children being roughed up in the streets, by SAPS and the army. They're brutalising our people, whether they are gangsters or not. I haven't seen any effective changes or change in behaviour or attitude or feeling safer since the deployment of the army,

2018 Bonteheuwel protests against gang violence and crime. We had lots of gang violence and lots of bodies on our streets. So we started street committees to patrol, focusing on gang violence, drug merchants and creating safe routes and passages for our children during this gang warfare. (Ashraf Hendricks/GroundUp)

A!: So you're saying that it's not only that they're not doing anything good; they're actually doing harm.

HA: Yes, and it's not just the army, it's SAPS too. The army is not trained as a civilian protection arm, and how to deal with our people. Obviously, we have people that speak up for their rights: "Why are you arresting him? He's got nothing on him, he's not a gangster." And their response is a typical brutal state response: "You're not going to tell us about your rights". You can lay a case afterwards, but in the meanwhile, your child is already in the system. Then he gets sent to the police cells. He gets mixed in with those gangsters and robbed.

So it's also about how do we work around a caring state, a caring response? How do we work on an unlearning on both sides of our community, as well as the state, unlearning and relearning? When we started, for instance, in the 94 and 95 period, with the Bill of Rights, still we were talking about Batho Pele and building a culture of human rights. But that is out the window. If cops come with disrespect, they're going to get disrespect, in most cases, right, and then they want to use their badges and their positions and uniforms to force respect.

A!: Obviously, this R800 million is a terrible waste of money. What would you like the government to be doing with it to make the situation better in places like Bonteheuwel?

HA: We would have used that money for youth development programmes, youth extra curriculum programmes. For the whole of December holidays, every Saturday we played soccer and netball on the fields in every block. Twice we had coaching clinics for the kids, and we took them swimming as part of the exercise to get ready for the Saturday tournaments. We fed them and offered psychosocial support, talking to the kids and the youth. Government must come to the party and we must develop programmes that speak to the issues of our children, that are occupying our youth, that develop other talents and interests, be it arts and culture, be it sports, be it academia, or just general fun stuff that youth enjoy. Many of us bring whatever we have in our cupboards, or we give a R50 towards something for them to eat while they're at the swimming pool.

So I think that money could be better spent in putting programmes there that are focused on prevention of crime, on psychosocial support, on drug rehabilitation, on so many other things that our youth can just live; live a normal life, a safe life.

CHE GUEVARA

By **Zolani Balekwa**

LAST YEAR IN Johannesburg, during the ZASO National Festival at the University of Johannesburg, I encountered a name that at the time meant very little to me.

Che Guevara.

It wasn't through a lecture.

It wasn't through a book.

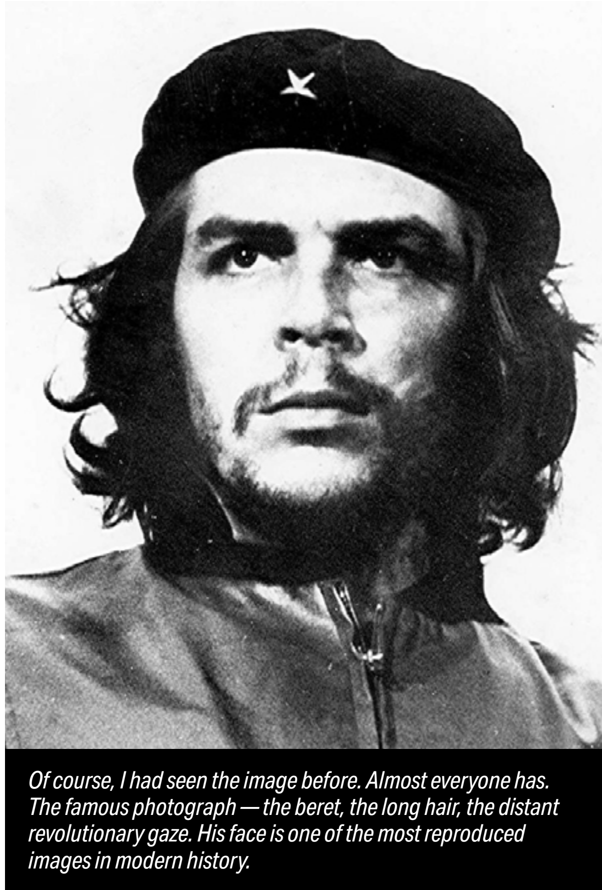
It wasn't even through a political discussion.

It was through a tent.

One of the spaces at the festival was named after him—the Che Guevara Tent. People were gathering there, talking, debating, resting between sessions. The name was printed boldly above the entrance, almost like a quiet declaration that whoever this man was, his spirit still had something to do with the conversations happening inside.

At the time, I didn't know much about him.

Of course, I had seen the image before. Almost everyone has. The famous photograph—the beret, the long hair, the distant revolutionary gaze. His face is one of the most reproduced images in modern history. It appears on t-shirts, posters, graffiti walls, student dorm rooms, political banners, even fashion brands that have nothing to do with the ideas he fought for.



Of course, I had seen the image before. Almost everyone has. The famous photograph — the beret, the long hair, the distant revolutionary gaze. His face is one of the most reproduced images in modern history.

But seeing a face is not the same as knowing a life.

And if I'm being honest, before that festival I had never taken the time to ask who Che Guevara really was.

So the name stayed in my mind.

When I returned to Cape Town, curiosity followed me home. I began reading about him, listening to lectures, going through essays and historical accounts. I wanted to understand why a man who died decades ago still had his name attached to political spaces across the world.

What I discovered was far more complex than the image that capitalism has turned into a decorative symbol.

Che Guevara was born in Argentina in 1928. He trained as a doctor which is something many people do not realise. During his travels across Latin America as a young man, he witnessed the harsh realities of poverty, land dispossession and exploitation under systems deeply tied to imperial power.

Those journeys changed him.

He saw communities living in extreme deprivation while multinational companies extracted wealth from their land. He saw workers treated as disposable labour while elites accumulated unimaginable power. These experiences convinced him that injustice was not accidental; it was structural.

Eventually he joined the Cuban revolutionary struggle alongside Fidel Castro, becoming one of the central figures in the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

But what fascinated me most while reading about Che was not only his role as a guerrilla fighter.

It was his philosophy.

Che Guevara spent a lot of time thinking and writing about the moral dimension of revolution. For him, socialism was not simply an economic arrangement or a political system. It was about transforming the very character of human beings.

He spoke about the creation of what he called the "New Man".

The New Man was not driven by profit, individual greed or personal accumulation. Instead, this person would be guided by solidarity, collective responsibility and a deep commitment to the well-being of others.

In Che's thinking, capitalism shapes people to behave competitively and to chase personal success, even when it harms the collective. Socialism, he believed, had to cultivate a different type of human consciousness altogether.

That idea struck me deeply.

Because if a revolution changes governments but leaves human values shaped by greed, ambition and opportunism, then the same oppressive patterns eventually return under new names.

Another thing that stayed with me was Che's commitment to internationalism.

After the Cuban Revolution succeeded, he became a government minister. He had real political authority. He had influence, recognition and security. Many people in that position would have remained comfortably within the structures of power they helped build.

But Che believed that liberation could not be limited to one country. He left Cuba to join liberation struggles elsewhere, first in the Congo and later in Bolivia, where he was eventually captured and killed in 1967.

Whatever one thinks about his strategies or the outcomes of those missions, it is impossible to ignore the seriousness of that commitment. He walked away from power because he believed that the struggle against imperial domination was global.

That idea resonates strongly when one begins to think about our own context here in South Africa.

We live in a country that achieved political liberation but where economic inequality remains among the highest in the world. The land question is still unresolved. Many townships still carry the spatial and economic architecture of apartheid.

Che often warned that imperialism does not disappear simply because colonial administrations leave. It can return through economic control, corporate domination and political compromise.

Those words feel painfully familiar in many parts of the Global South today.

But perhaps the most powerful thing I encountered while reading Che was a sentence that seems almost contradictory when people imagine revolution.

He once wrote: "The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love."

Not hatred.

Not revenge.

But love—love for humanity so deep that accepting injustice becomes impossible.

That idea forces one to rethink what revolutionary commitment actually means. It is not about spectacle or romantic imagery. It is about responsibility. It is about refusing to remain comfortable in a world structured by inequality.

For me, all of this began with something very simple. A name on a tent at a festival in Johannesburg. At the time it was just a curiosity—a word printed on fabric above a gathering space. But sometimes small encounters open doors to deeper questions. And once those questions begin, they have a way of changing how you see the world around you.

Sometimes a revolution in thought begins with something as quiet as reading a name for the first time and deciding to ask who it belonged to.

Zolani Balekwa is a writer, artivist, filmmaker and director of **Artivism Productions 24** whose work channels community resilience stories into poetry and film for community activism.

Familiar Faces

By **Rea Mmethi**

A rabbi a priest and an immigrant walk into a bar

And the bar keep says what is this a woke joke

It's simple, formulaic, really

Whether the immigrant walks into a bar or a hospital or a dingy bureaucrat's office with his dreaming heart pulsing in his palms

The joke is always his trailing stench of otherness

Or the joke is his accent: clumsy and thick in his throat

Loose like he lost some consonants as he was flung onto a sinking boat

Or the joke is the food he eats

Endowed with alien aromatics and monstrous meats

Pepper burns the wisdom of learning onto his tongue

Oil swirls map out the psychological paradigms of the dispersed young

Chicken bones patterned after new Love formed where the old diaspora sprung

In another joke he doesn't walk into the bar

He is the bent-backed silhouette that hovers over the tip jar

Swishing soapsuds with a quick slick wrist flick

Onto his, are collaged the haggard faces of his bearded Brothers

Jailed for having bombs up their sleeves, though no one has told their still hoping mothers

And in another he drives the rabbi and the priest to the bar

They share toast of burning liquids in the car

A train stop and a drink are both departures toward hope

They are jovial and mess and pass rude whispers about the pope

He is cautious

He knows his jaw is always the punchline no matter the joke

And another he is a sweat-beaded colossus moving quietly

Among the weeds head hung in filial piety

His name, transliterated Taurayi to sleek TY flirts the line of erasure

What split assimilation from colonisation has been blurred

He is a yearning tangle of reaching roots like bamboo shoots

that only want to be heard

He harnessed his green thumb from replanting shaken family trees again and again and again

In another joke, he is a roadside vendor with a patient smile

Refuge strung from scar tissue and gentle lies

He swears his sons, engulfed by flames before his very eyes,

were only chasing the light

In another, he is a shrewd merchant staring down the dying embers of his bright-light syndrome

Or a pregnant woman gritting resolve so her progeny won't roam

Or a steel-faced stallion with a rubber tire for a necklace, dreaming of home

No one leaves until home becomes staring down the barrel of a gun bigger than your whole body

or the rubble of what was your kitchen shovelling you to shore

or your village mud huts crumbling under the brazen giants of American-made grenades

This sort of travelling joke works because immigrants are always walking into places,

Only sometimes, they barely crawl out.

Besides, it's always funny to be lost.

Rea Mmethi is a South African word-weaver and Health Sciences student, who writes at the intersection of care, language, and socialist practice. Their work seeks to embed socialist ideology into everyday politics.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF AFROPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA

AND HOW WE RESIST IT

By **Faisal Garba**

The unemployed South African worker is encouraged to blame the Zimbabwean street vendor, the Ethiopian spaza shop owner, or the Somali trader instead of asking why wealth remains concentrated, why services collapse, and why economic opportunities are so scarce. (Photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/GroundUp)

AFROPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA IS often presented as a problem of 'foreigners versus locals', as though it emerges naturally from cultural hostility or competition between poor people. But this explanation hides the deeper political and economic realities that produce anti-immigrant violence and xenophobic mobilisation. The rise of Afrophobia in South Africa cannot be understood outside the context of deep inequality, unemployment, dispossession, political manipulation, and the failures of post-apartheid transformation.

It is not simply about prejudice. It is about how social anger is redirected away from systems of exploitation and towards vulnerable people who are themselves victims of those same systems.

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Decades after the end of apartheid, ownership of land and wealth remains concentrated in the hands of a small minority. Approximately 72% of arable land is owned by a very small, predominantly white section of society. In such a context, millions of people struggle daily to secure livelihoods, housing, healthcare, and employment. Yet, instead of addressing these structural inequalities, political elites and sections of capital often channel public frustration towards migrants and refugees.

The politics of attacking migrants

Afrophobia therefore functions as a political diversion. Rather than confronting the failures of the state to transform property relations, create decent work, or provide social security, migrants become scapegoats for broader crises produced by capitalism and neoliberalism. The unemployed South African worker is encouraged to blame the Zimbabwean street vendor, the Ethiopian spaza shop owner, or the Somali trader, instead of asking why wealth remains concentrated, why services collapse, and why economic opportunities are so scarce.

The timing of anti-immigrant violence reveals this political dimension clearly: xenophobic attacks often intensify around local and national elections; political factions mobilise communities by promising to remove 'foreigners' and redistribute shops or opportunities to locals. In some cases, communities themselves threaten politicians with 'doing xenophobia' if promised removals are not carried out. Xenophobia thus becomes a political weapon—a bargaining tool used in struggles over local power and patronage.

Groups such as Operation Dudula and political formations like the Patriotic Alliance have built support by exploiting this anger. But these movements are not spontaneous expressions of working-class frustration; they are carefully cultivated campaigns, tied to broader right-wing networks and funded by sections of capital and elite interests. Their purpose is to redirect legitimate social discontent away from the economic system itself and towards migrants.

Accordingly, Afrophobia is not simply produced 'from below'. Anti-immigrant politics is often driven by middle-class and elite actors. Universities, media organisations, politicians, and commentators play a crucial role in constructing the migrant as a threat. The media repeatedly associates migrants with crime, illegality, and disorder. Once nationality is constantly highlighted in reports about crime or social problems, an association forms in the public imagination: migrant equals criminal; foreigner equals danger.

Migrants are not outsiders

This discourse obscures the reality, that many migrants are deeply embedded in local communities and economies. Migrant-owned spaza shops, for example, often thrive because they meet social needs ignored by larger corporations and formal retailers. They sell affordable goods close to where people live, extend credit to struggling families, and develop relationships of trust and mutual support with township residents. In places like Hermanus, communities often viewed Ethiopian shopkeepers as assets because they provided accessible and affordable food and services.

At the same time, big business frequently perceives these small-scale migrant traders as competitors. Local authorities and large commercial interests in Hermanus allegedly collaborated to harass and criminalise migrant traders. This demonstrates another important truth: Afrophobia is not only about culture or identity. It is also about economic competition and the defence of entrenched interests.

The issue of "illegality" is central to this politics of exclusion. Anti-immigrant campaigns frequently portray migrants as undocumented criminals flooding the country. Yet many migrants initially entered South Africa legally and later became undocumented because

of the dysfunction and hostility of the Department of Home Affairs. Applications are lost, permits are delayed, and people are effectively rendered illegal through bureaucratic exclusion. The category of the 'illegal immigrant' is therefore often politically manufactured.

Despite the intensity of xenophobic rhetoric, everyday life in working-class communities is more complex and contradictory than media narratives suggest. There are tensions, certainly, but there are also countless acts of solidarity and cooperation between South Africans and migrants. In many townships, locals protect migrants from attacks, organise together for housing and services, and build relationships rooted in shared survival.

An example of this solidarity is the story of Ethiopian traders protected by South African women during periods of anti-immigrant violence. These women risked their own safety to shelter and disguise a migrant trader because he had become part of their community. He had sold them blankets on credit, built relationships with them, and become woven into their everyday lives. This story reveals that solidarity is not abstract. It grows through shared struggles, mutual care, and human connection.

How we can resist

What, then, can be done to push back against Afrophobia?

First, we must reject nationalist retaliation and cycles of revenge. Responding to xenophobia by attacking South African businesses elsewhere on the continent is reactionary. Such reactions only reinforce the divisions that right-wing forces seek to cultivate. Afrophobia can only be defeated through deeper continental solidarity, not reciprocal hostility.

Second, organising must begin where ordinary people actually are. Rather than lecturing communities abstractly about Pan-Africanism, cosmopolitanism and humanism, activists must connect anti-xenophobic politics to people's immediate struggles—for jobs, housing, healthcare, education, and dignity. Migrants and locals often face the same structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, and dispossession. Effective organising must reveal these shared interests and common enemies.

This means 'fusing struggles'. Campaigns against evictions, unemployment, environmental destruction, and austerity must consciously include migrants, rather than treating them as separate categories. International NGOs sometimes reinforce divisions by isolating migrants as special humanitarian subjects, instead of integrating them into broader community struggles. This can unintentionally deepen resentment rather than solidarity.

Third, there is a need for cross-border organising across Africa. Capital already operates across borders, exploiting workers and resources throughout the continent. Communities resisting displacement, environmental destruction, and neoliberal restructuring must also build transnational alliances. Pan-African solidarity cannot remain rhetorical; it must be grounded in shared political struggle.

A destroyed tuck shop run by an Ethiopian family in Rosettenville. *In the end, the real question is not whether migrants belong in South Africa. The real question is whether we will allow elites and political opportunists to divide ordinary people while the structures that produce poverty and inequality remain intact. (Photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/GroundUp)*

From colonial borders to Pan-African solidarity

Such a struggle will have to confront the contradiction at the heart of African governments' approach to migration. While many states have signed the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFCT), very few have ratified protocols guaranteeing free movement for African people. Capital is allowed to move freely, but workers and poor people are criminalised for crossing borders. Challenging Afrophobia therefore also requires demanding freedom of movement and opposing the hardening of borders inherited from colonial rule.

Underlying all of this is a broader political vision. Afrophobia is rooted in exclusionary ideas of citizenship and belonging that were shaped by colonialism and reproduced by postcolonial states. To resist it requires imagining African identity differently—not as something fixed by borders or passports, but as an open and evolving process rooted in shared humanity and collective struggle.

Finally, young people are central to building this alternative future. Thus, political education and cultural work among African youth is crucial. If Afrophobia is learned through media, politics, and everyday narratives, then solidarity must also be taught and cultivated. Young people need opportunities to think critically about migration, identity, inequality, and Pan-Africanism from an early age.

The struggle against Afrophobia is therefore inseparable from the struggle for social transformation itself. It is a struggle against inequality, exploitation, dispossession, and political manipulation. It demands that we refuse the false divisions imposed between 'locals' and 'foreigners' and instead recognise the shared conditions shaping working-class lives across the continent.

In the end, the real question is not whether migrants belong in South Africa. The real question is whether we will allow elites and political opportunists to divide ordinary people, while the structures that produce poverty and inequality remain intact. The answer to Afrophobia lies not in stronger borders or harsher exclusion, but in solidarity, justice, and a genuinely emancipatory Pan-African politics.

Faisal Garba is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and Associate Professor of Sociology, Migration and Mobility at the Africa Institute Sharjah. He works on African mobility, political economy, and social theory. He leads the Migration and Mobility Hub UCT.

King Misuzulu kaZwelithini, Chairperson of the Ingonyama Trust Board. For nearly 15 years, the Ingonyama Trust had been converting customary land rights and Permission-to-Occupy (PTO) certificates into residential leases that required residents to pay rent. (Photo: GCIS / GovernmentZA, CC BY-ND 2.0).

Rural land rights still left in limbo:

unpacking the Ingonyama Trust refunds process

By **Nokwanda Sihlali**

FOR NEARLY 15 YEARS, THE Ingonyama Trust had been converting customary land rights and Permission-to-Occupy (PTO) certificates into residential leases that required residents to pay rent. In 2021, the Pietermaritzburg High Court, in a unanimous judgment, declared it unlawful. The case was brought by the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution (CASAC) together with the Rural Women's Movement (RWM) and a handful of individual applicants. The Court ordered that all monies collected under the lease programme be refunded.

Unlike other land-related judgments that remain dormant, this order has finally resulted in some tangible action. The Ingonyama Trust Board has announced that it will refund over R4 million to affected residents. Approximately 1,600 people have been identified as requiring refunds.

On the surface, this appears to be a positive example of compliance with a court order. But while the order is not being ignored, the way it is being implemented raises serious concerns. Even though the judgment required refunds to be paid, it did not prescribe how those refunds should be administered. It did not establish a framework. It did not require public disclosure of beneficiaries or amounts paid. It did not mandate independent oversight or auditing mechanisms. This silence has created a procedural vacuum. This is concerning, given that the rights being protected are already vulnerable.

Law affirms customary land rights

South Africa has produced progressive land jurisprudence over the past decade. Courts have affirmed the protection of informal land rights and recognised the living nature of customary law. They have confirmed that communities whose tenure is insecure, because of past racially discriminatory laws, are entitled to constitutional protection.

Yet a troubling pattern persists: judgments are handed down, but implementation remains partial or inadequate. The recent refund process initiated by the Ingonyama Trust must be situated within this broader crisis of implementation.

Our courts have confirmed that informal and customary land rights are legally protected property rights.

The Constitutional Court has made it clear that holders of informal land rights under the Interim Protection of Informal Land Rights Act (IPILRA) cannot be deprived of those rights without their consent. The Court has emphasised that consent is required and that mining rights do not automatically extinguish existing informal land rights.

The High Court in the Baleni judgment affirmed that mining may not proceed on communal land where it would deprive communities of their informal land rights, without their consent.

More recently, communities successfully challenged the authorisation granted to Shell to conduct seismic exploration off the Wild Coast. In considering the applicant's arguments, the Court makes clear that consultation with traditional leaders is not the same as consultation with communities and does not substitute for it. It also considered the cultural and spiritual rights of the relevant communities.

These judgments collectively affirm a clear understanding. Customary and informal land rights are property rights protected by the Constitution. Communities are not passive beneficiaries of administrative discretion; they have rights.

However, the reality on the ground is often not the same as the clarity of judicial pronouncements. Implementation frequently occurs in a narrow and technical manner. Orders

are complied with procedurally, but not always in substance. Structural reform and public accountability are left unaddressed.

Residents still waiting for their money

Residents have reportedly been asked to contact the Trust to claim their refunds. This shifts the burden onto rural citizens, many of whom may lack access to information or reliable communication networks. Some affected individuals may have passed away. Others may not even know that they are entitled to refunds.

In the absence of a transparent and publicly accessible process, several critical questions remain unanswered. There is no publicly verified list of beneficiaries. There is no clear indication of how individual refund amounts were calculated, or if they include interest. While the judgment required repayment, it did not address these procedural safeguards.

As a result, compliance is being reduced to a closed administrative exercise that communities cannot meaningfully scrutinise. This is not simply a technical gap in the refund process. It reflects a broader failure to implement the implications of the judgment for the system.

The Court's ruling not only exposed the unlawfulness of the lease programme; it also highlighted the need for clear, accountable systems for administering and recording land rights. That responsibility lies, in part, with the Minister of Land Reform and Rural Development. In the absence of such systems, processes like the refund programme are left to unfold in an ad hoc and opaque fashion. The broader concern is that this refund programme may replicate a familiar pattern in South Africa's land reform landscape. Courts articulate strong protections. Institutions comply minimally, and structural issues are left unresolved.

The lease conversion programme fundamentally altered the legal relationship between the Ingonyama Trust and rural residents. Customary rights holders were transformed into tenants. Payments were extracted under an unlawful leasehold programme.

True implementation therefore requires more than financial repayment:

- It requires institutional reform, including the development of a clear and accountable system for land rights administration. This falls within the responsibility of the Minister and the Department; it remains unfulfilled.
- It requires institutional reform to prevent similar tenure distortions from occurring again.
- It requires transparent systems for recording and protecting customary land rights.
- It requires public reporting obligations so that compliance can be independently verified.

Without such measures, the refund process risks addressing the symptom while leaving the structural vulnerability intact.

Systematic change is needed

The difficulties surrounding implementation are compounded by the continued absence of comprehensive communal land tenure legislation. Since 2017, the Draft Communal Land Tenure Bill has stalled without enactment. The absence of a clear statutory framework leaves communal land governance fragmented. It remains vulnerable to discretionary decision-making by the Ingonyama Trust, traditional leadership, and government officials responsible for administering communal land.

A comprehensive Communal Land Tenure Act needs to establish clear rules for recording rights, regulating conversions, ensuring consent, and mandating transparent administrative procedures. It should also reduce reliance on litigation as the primary mechanism for enforcing constitutional protections. Until such legislation is enacted and operationalised, communities must repeatedly turn to the courts to vindicate rights that should already be secure.

The refund programme is significant because it acknowledges that the Trust's conduct undermined customary land rights and that money must be returned to those affected. That acknowledgement matters.

But refunds carried out without transparent reporting mechanisms leave communities unable to verify whether justice has truly been done. The deeper question is whether the judgement has been implemented in a manner that strengthens tenure security and public trust. Until court orders dealing with the land rights of rural people are fulfilled in a transparent and accountable way, the gap between constitutional promise and lived reality will persist.

Nokwanda Sihlali is a Research Officer at the Land and Accountability Research Centre.

Customary and informal land rights are property rights protected by the Constitution. Communities are not passive beneficiaries of administrative discretion; they have rights. (Photo courtesy of LARC).

PALESTINE
the genocide the world stopped watching

By **Usuf Chikte**

What defines the present moment is not only the scale of Palestinian suffering. It is also the terrifying normality with which genocide and apartheid now coexist alongside global capitalist expansion. Gaza is starved while stock markets soar. (Photo: Palestinian News & Information Agency (WAFA), in contract with APAimages / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)

AS THE ZIONIST STATE WIDENED its war across the region, bombing Lebanon and Iran, and dragging West Asia toward regional catastrophe, Western governments and mainstream media institutions shifted attention elsewhere. Palestine disappeared from the front pages. But while the cameras moved, the genocide deepened.

Gaza continued to burn. The West Bank continued to fracture under settler expansion and military terror. Israeli apartheid hardened into openly codified racial supremacy. The machinery of extermination did not pause because the headlines changed.

What defines the present moment is not only the scale of Palestinian suffering. It is also the terrifying normality with which genocide and apartheid now coexist alongside global capitalist expansion. Gaza is starved while stock markets soar. Entire bloodlines are erased while military contractors celebrate record profits. Children die beneath collapsed concrete while artificial intelligence firms, surveillance corporations, and weapons manufacturers accumulate unimaginable wealth. This is the capitalist system functioning exactly as designed.

Since October 2023, the genocide in Palestine has become inseparable from the broader political economy of imperialism. Major American and European arms corporations have all benefited from the permanent war economy generated by Israeli aggression and regional escalation. Bombardment creates procurement cycles. Siege generates military contracts. Every destroyed neighbourhood in Gaza becomes an advertisement for weapons systems, drone technologies, surveillance infrastructure, and urban warfare doctrine.

Gaza has become both a killing field and a showroom for the global arms industry.

At the same time, the American technology sector has consolidated unprecedented economic power. Microsoft, NVIDIA, Alphabet, Amazon, Meta, Apple, and Tesla have expanded their dominance during the same period in which Palestinians have endured industrial-scale slaughter. Artificial intelligence, predictive targeting systems, biometric databases, cloud infrastructure, and surveillance technologies increasingly intersect with militarised occupation regimes.

Palestine is not external to twenty-first century capitalism. It is embedded within its circuits of accumulation. This is why Western ruling classes have absorbed the genocide without meaningful rupture. Israel remains too strategically valuable as a militarised outpost of empire. And capitalism does not oppose militarism. Militarism is one of its most profitable sectors.

War absorbs surplus production. It disciplines labour. It secures trade routes and energy corridors. It expands state surveillance capacities and justifies authoritarian power. Palestine exposes the material foundations hidden beneath liberal rhetoric about 'human rights', 'democracy', and the so-called 'rules-based order'.

Gaza: ceasefire as permanent siege

The January 2025 ceasefire was presented internationally as the beginning of de-escalation. Palestinians emerged cautiously from shelters and rubble believing perhaps the most intense phase of extermination had passed. But the ceasefire was never intended to produce peace.

Israel refused to commit formally to ending hostilities after the agreement's initial phase. Hamas nevertheless accepted the terms, after receiving guarantees from mediators including Egypt, Qatar, and the United States. Those guarantees proved worthless.

On 18 March 2025, while negotiations were still ongoing, Israel launched surprise airstrikes in the early hours of the morning, massacring hundreds of Palestinians within minutes. Families sleeping inside damaged homes and displacement tents were incinerated beneath aerial bombardment. Israeli officials later admitted that deception had formed part of the military strategy.

What followed was the continuation of genocidal warfare under shifting humanitarian language: relentless bombing, mass displacement, aid obstruction, engineered famine, and the systematic destruction of Gaza's capacity to sustain life.

Entire family networks have disappeared. Journalists, doctors, academics, aid workers, paramedics, teachers, and United Nations staff members have been deliberately targeted and killed in unprecedented numbers. Hospitals have been besieged and destroyed. Universities flattened. Bakeries bombed. Water systems collapsed. Agricultural land razed. Refugee shelters attacked repeatedly.

It is the deliberate annihilation of the social foundations necessary for Palestinian existence. And starvation has become one of the central weapons of this exterminatory project.

Human rights organisations, UN agencies, famine experts, and humanitarian groups have repeatedly documented the systematic weaponisation of food, water, medicine, and humanitarian access. Aid convoys accumulate at crossings while stunted children starve metres away. Flour rots inside blocked trucks while families survive on animal feed and contaminated water.

The famine is entirely man-made. This is not simply siege warfare. It is the industrial management of death.

Yet even amid this catastrophe, imperial diplomacy continues performing the theatre of neutrality. Western governments speak endlessly about "stability," "security," and "de-escalation" while continuing to arm, finance, and diplomatically shield the apartheid state.

The political message is unmistakable: Palestinians are expected to surrender all

resistance and accept a state of permanent subjugation before being permitted to rebuild from Israeli bombardment.

Extraction, empire, and resource theft

The occupation is sustained not only through ideology and military violence, but through material extraction.

For decades, Israel has exploited Palestinian land, water, labour, and natural resources while denying Palestinians sovereignty over them. One of the clearest examples is the Gaza Marine gas field discovered off Gaza's coast in 1999. Those reserves could have provided Palestinians with energy independence and billions in public revenue.

Yet, even while Gaza starves, discussions continue among Israeli and international energy corporations regarding offshore extraction, export corridors, and integration into European energy markets. The same governments that lecture Palestinians about "peace" simultaneously facilitate the plunder of Palestinian resources.

The genocide therefore cannot be separated from the broader structures of imperial accumulation. Palestine sits at the intersection of militarism, energy politics, trade routes, surveillance capitalism, and geopolitical control.

And the complicity extends beyond Washington and Europe.

Large sections of the Arab ruling classes have functioned as passive collaborators in the maintenance of the regional order. While millions across the Arab world mobilised in solidarity with Palestine, many monarchies and military dictatorships focused primarily on suppressing domestic dissent, while preserving relations with the United States and Israel.

The Arab masses remain overwhelmingly pro-Palestinian. Their rulers do not. This contradiction has become one of the defining political realities of the present era: populations radicalised by witnessing genocide in real time confronting despotic rulers deeply integrated into imperial structures of finance, military dependency, and authoritarian control.

The West Bank: annexation through terror

If Gaza represents extermination through overwhelming military force, the West Bank, also under illegal occupation, represents annexation through fragmentation, displacement, and slow-motion strangulation.

Israeli military operations across Jenin, Tulkarem, Nablus, and refugee camps throughout the occupied territory increasingly resemble full-scale colonial warfare. Tanks, drones, helicopter gunships, mass arrests, curfews, assassinations, and home demolitions have become routine instruments of domination.

Simultaneously, settler violence has intensified under direct state protection. Armed settlers burn crops, attack villages, assault families, seize land, and terrorise communities, while Israeli soldiers either stand aside or actively participate. Settlement expansion has accelerated dramatically while Palestinian communities are uprooted and expelled. This is Zionism stripped of liberal camouflage. A settler-colonial project sustained through racial supremacy, militarised segregation, demographic engineering, and permanent territorial expansion.

The apartheid system is no longer hidden behind diplomatic euphemisms. It is openly codified in law.

The Israeli state now operates through an explicit dual legal regime between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Jewish settlers living illegally on occupied land enjoy full civil rights under Israeli law, while Palestinians remain subject to military rule, military courts, checkpoints, administrative detention, collective punishment, and lethal state violence.

This is apartheid in its purest form.

The collapse of international law

But Palestine exposes something even larger than Israel's colonial fascism. It reveals the collapse of the entire postwar architecture of international law. For decades, Western powers invoked the language of legality, democracy, and human rights to justify interventions across the Global South. International law was presented as universal, neutral, and binding.

Palestine has shattered that illusion completely. The International Court of Justice issues warnings. UN rapporteurs document atrocities. Human rights organisations compile overwhelming evidence of war crimes, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, starvation, and genocide.

And still nothing happens. No meaningful sanctions. No comprehensive arms embargo. No enforcement. No accountability.

Israel enjoys a level of impunity unmatched in contemporary international politics because it remains protected by imperial power, above all the United States. International law applies rigorously to enemies of empire and selectively, or not at all, to its allies.

Palestine therefore reveals far more than the catastrophe of one people. It exposes the moral, political, and legal decomposition of the entire imperial order.

And still the Palestinian people resist. They resist through memory, through survival, through political organisation, through refusal, through return, through armed struggle, through steadfastness in the face of annihilation.

The Palestinian struggle has never been merely a national question. It is one of the clearest front lines in the global confrontation against colonialism, empire, racial capitalism, and organised dispossession.

As Ghassan Kanafani wrote: "The Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary wherever he is, as a cause of the exploited and oppressed masses in our era."

That remains true today. Palestine is the mirror held up to the modern world. And what it reflects is an imperial system prepared to sacrifice entire peoples in defence of power, profit, and domination.

Usuf Chikte is a co-ordinator for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (Cape Town).

Israeli settlements near Bethlehem. If Gaza represents extermination through overwhelming military force, the West Bank, also under illegal occupation, represents annexation through fragmentation, displacement, and slow-motion strangulation. (Photo: Garry Walsh / Trócaire, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0)

China in the driver's seat

By **Alexander Korolev**

This is a slightly shortened version of an article that first appeared in The Conversation.

IT WAS QUITE A WEEK FOR BEIJING, with back-to-back visits by the leaders of the United States and Russia. Chinese President Xi Jinping has had his hands full with hosting duties, gun salutes, photo opportunities and high-level talks.

US President Donald Trump's state visit was his first to Beijing since 2017. It came at a moment of strained China-US relations, with the US at war in the Middle East and its foreign policy undergoing a massive transformation under Trump.

For Putin, it was his 25th official visit to China. The trip was intended to further consolidate the China–Russia strategic alignment amid global uncertainty. Putin was also keen to secure China's continued economic lifeline and diplomatic cover, as its war with Ukraine grinds on.

And while the timing of the back-to-back visits should not be over-interpreted, they do reveal a deeper structural shift in global politics.

Beijing's rising confidence

First, the United States is clearly no longer the most important country in China's strategic worldview—and Beijing is increasingly willing to show it.

This was visible in Xi's posturing and negotiating style with Trump. From his rather distant handshake to his dominant body language, Xi sent a message: Washington has a limited ability to influence Beijing anymore.

The modest outcomes of their summit reinforced this dynamic. Trump left China without a formal deal, a press conference or a joint communiqué. Nor was there a breakthrough on either Iran or Taiwan.

Putin, meanwhile, met his "good and old friend" Xi and took home some 20 agreements ranging from trade to technology.

The most striking, if not unsettling, moment was Xi's invocation of the "Thucydides Trap" during his meeting with Trump. This is the idea that a rising power inevitably threatens an established one, risking war.

Xi asked:

> *Can China and the United States transcend the so-called 'Thucydides Trap' and forge a new paradigm for major-power relations?*

Xi's directness sent a warning: the US risks creating a major crisis if it continues to rely on a containment strategy to counter China's rise.

In short, Beijing used the Trump visit to signal confidence, autonomy and the fact that Washington is not the only capital that matters to China.

The deeper message is this: if Washington seeks to isolate China, Beijing can lean even more heavily on its relationship with Moscow. (Photo: Kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

Russia has new usefulness to Beijing

Second, the China–Russia alignment has become less equal, but it has gained greater strategic depth. And Beijing is now using it to put pressure on the US leadership.

During a private garden stroll through the highly secretive Zhongnanhai leadership compound last week, Trump asked whether Xi often brings other world leaders there. Xi replied that such visits are "extremely rare", but added that "Putin has been here".

In the current geopolitical context, this served as a subtle reminder to Trump that China's "no limits" partnership with Russia is not rhetorical. Beijing was signalling Moscow remains a privileged strategic partner—and that China has options.

The deeper message is this: if Washington seeks to isolate China, Beijing can lean even more heavily on its relationship with Moscow.

China does not need to help Russia "win" in Ukraine to make this point. What matters is that Beijing has the ability—if it chooses—to bolster Russia's war effort through economic, diplomatic and long-term technological and energy cooperation. Beijing's influence now extends well beyond the Indo-Pacific and reaches into Europe in ways Washington cannot ignore.

Xi didn't give Putin everything he sought during his meeting, though.

While Putin and Xi came to a "general understanding on the parameters" of a new pipeline, called the Power of Siberia-2, to bring Russian gas to China, no final deal was signed.

China is now in the driver's seat

Third, China now sees itself as the central node of great-power politics.

For many decades, the United States sat at the apex of the "great triangle", balancing between China and the Soviet Union and then Russia.

Today, the geometry has flipped. Both Trump and Putin felt compelled to come to Beijing—for stabilisation, reassurance and strategic signalling—even as they confront each other elsewhere.

China is not playing triangular diplomacy in the classic sense. It is not trying to pit Washington and Moscow against each other. Instead, it is positioning itself as the system's centre: the place where major-power diplomacy must pass, even if the outcomes are uncertain.

China is not at the apex of this arrangement because it is the strongest militarily or economically, but because it has the confidence to engage the US and Russia on its own terms.

In this new geometry, great-power politics does not revolve around Washington. Increasingly, it runs through Beijing.

Alexander Korolev is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, UNSW Sydney.

ANTI-FASCIST INTERNATIONALISM FROM BELOW

LESSONS FROM PORTO ALEGRE

By **Madoda Cuphe**

FROM 26–29 MARCH 2026, I HAD the privilege of attending an important anti-fascist conference in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The gathering brought together grassroots movements, trade unions, Left political parties, socialist organisations, youth activists, women's organisations and international solidarity networks from across the world. The conference was organised by MES-PSOL together with organisations linked to the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, the Workers' Party of Porto Alegre, the local Communist Party of Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), local trade unions and many social movement organisations. Different organisations from other countries also participated as guests.

The conference demonstrated something important and encouraging for all progressive forces globally: despite political differences and diverse ideological traditions, the Left can unite in defence of democracy, social justice and working-class struggles against the growing threat of fascism and the far-right.

The first day of the conference opened with a massive march through the streets of Porto Alegre, attended by more than 7,000 people. It was not a march of elites or professional politicians. It was a movement of ordinary workers, indigenous communities, students, unemployed people, women and youth. The energy and determination on the streets showed that resistance to fascism is rooted among the people themselves.

A crisis of global capitalism

The rise of far-right political forces across the world has become one of the defining political developments of recent years. In many countries, these forces have either already come to power or are increasingly close to doing so. This dangerous trend is unfolding alongside the deep crisis of traditional political parties and political regimes. Millions of working people have lost confidence in institutions that have failed to address unemployment, inequality, corruption, poverty and social collapse.

The emergence of neo-fascist movements is not accidental. It is a byproduct of the broader crisis of the global capitalist system. Decades of austerity policies, attacks on workers, privatisation and growing inequality have created conditions of despair and anger among ordinary people. Established political forces responded to these crises with corruption, repression and policies that protected the wealthy while the poor continued to suffer. As a result, many people became disillusioned with traditional politics and began searching for alternatives.

The far-right has attempted to exploit this anger by blaming migrants, minorities, women, progressive movements and democratic institutions for the failures of capitalism itself. But the conference in Porto Alegre reminded us that there is another alternative, a politics of solidarity, internationalism and struggle from below.

Importantly, the conference also highlighted that fighting fascism cannot only be reduced to electoral politics. The real strength against authoritarianism lies in organised communities, militant workers' movements, student struggles, women's resistance, indigenous mobilisation and grassroots organising. Fascism grows when working-class organisations are weak and fragmented. It can be defeated when social movements unite around concrete struggles for dignity, jobs, land, housing, democracy and economic justice.

Lessons for Africa

For those of us coming from Africa, there are important lessons to draw from this experience. We too face rising inequality, unemployment, xenophobia, deepening poverty and increasing frustrations among the masses. We also witness attempts by reactionary forces to divide the working class and redirect social anger away from the failures of capitalism. Building unity amongst grassroots organisations, trade unions, left formations and community struggles is therefore not a luxury, it is a necessity.

The conference resolved that the struggles against fascism and right-wing policies cannot be divorced from the movement to abolish capitalism and imperialism around the world. The conference therefore took a stance to support these movements in every country. There will be a coordinated international resistance against capitalism and imperialism, a system that breeds fascism. As we face a similar situation with the rise of Xenophobia in South Africa, the call is to unite all Left-leaning forces to resist.

A protest in Joburg against xenophobia. *The conference resolved that the struggles against fascism and right-wing policies cannot be divorced from the movement to abolish capitalism and imperialism around the world. (Photo: Kimberly Mutandiro/GroundUp)*

Madoda Cuphe is an activist who works for the movement support unit of AIDC and a member of ZASO.

HUNGARY: SOME THOUGHTS ON ORBÁN'S DEFEAT

By **Fabrizio Burattini**

This is a slightly edited version of an article that first appeared in English on the **International Viewpoint website**.

THE CATHOLIC CONSERVATIVE Peter Magyar, a former collaborator of Viktor Orban, won the April general elections, with a two-thirds majority. This will allow him, if he wishes and if he is allowed to do so, to dismantle the system put in place by the former pro-Putin nationalist president, who has conceded defeat.

In view of the results, triumphalist declarations are predictable: "We have liberated Hungary," proclaimed Peter Magyar late in the evening, during jubilant demonstrations in Budapest. He was greeted by the cheers of tens of thousands of people, some of whom set off fireworks. "We have reconquered our homeland," he added while waving the Hungarian flag.

Magyar's party, Tisza, won 138 seats out of 199 with 53.56% of the vote, against 55 seats and 37.86% of the vote for Fidesz, Orban's party. This was thanks in particular to a record turnout of 79.50%. Orban took note of the "painful but unequivocal" results and "congratulated the winning party".

Two elements of this victory should be highlighted.

Celebrating the victory of a conservative

First, predatory capitalism has been in place in this country (and obviously not only in this country) for several decades. It seemed totally out of the question to contemplate any option, even if timidly left-wing, moderate or radical, which offered a perspective other than that. Today, all progressive and democratic Hungarians (and us too with them) are forced to rejoice in the victory of an ultra-conservative because he defeated a para-fascist.

It is a bit as if, from a hypothetical perspective, we should rejoice at a possible victory in Italy for the party of Marina Berlusconi and Antonio Tajani if they decide to oppose Giorgia Meloni... This is really a sign of the times and of the disaster of the Left.

Celebrating a defeat for the far right

And second, Orbán's defeat is also a crushing defeat for Trump, Netanyahu, Meloni, Salvini, Le Pen, the German AfD, the Argentine Milei, and their entire neo-fascist clique. The entire global far right had openly and unanimously declared itself in favour of their Hungarian friend. It is no coincidence that, at least at the time of writing, they are all silent and act as if nothing has happened.

And let's not forget (I don't think our "radical left" wants to realise this) that this defeat is also, and in some respects especially, a defeat for Putin and his ambitions.

Behind the defeat of Orbán and his friends scattered throughout the global far right are the Ukrainian resistance, the revolt of young Serbs, the failure of Meloni's referendum and the American "No Kings" movement.

The youth may go further

On closer inspection, mainly of the young people of Budapest and other cities in the country, this defeat represented a real wave of national dignity against Putin; its scale prevented the coup that Vance, Putin and Orbán himself had envisaged, modelled on Capitol Hill in 2021.

Of course, Orbán's oligarchic system, a brazen form of authoritarian and neoliberal capitalism, will not disappear on its own. Nor is this in the programme of Magyar, who wants to preserve the system while trying to reconcile it with the interests and working methods of the EU's technocracy. Peter Magyar, in fact, as we have pointed out on several occasions, is and remains a national-conservative. He has chosen to remain a nationalist, even if the logic of national conservatism has led him to distance himself from Orbán's brazen Putinism.

The future of Hungary is in the hands of the thousands of young people who, since Sunday night, have invaded the streets of Budapest; in the civil society that is mobilising and organising; in the possibility that they will not stop there or be satisfied with Magyar's victory. This may only be the beginning.

What happened in Budapest should encourage us all, because it shows us that there is no supposed invincibility of fascism 2.0, of the neo-reactionary current that Orban, Meloni, Trump, Putin and co. represent.

But it also shows us the depth of the crisis of the Left, of a truly radical, internationalist Left, intransigent on democracy, which does not exist in Hungary and, alas, not even in our country of Italy, further west.

Victor Orban, defeated in the April election. *The future of Hungary is in the hands of the thousands of young people who invaded the streets of Budapest; in the civil society that is mobilising and organising; in the possibility that they will not stop there or be satisfied with Magyar's victory. (Photo: Steffen Prößdorf / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0)*

Fabrizio Burattini is a trade unionist in the CGIL and has been active in the Italian section of the Fourth International since 1968.

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SOLIDARITY WITH ALL AFRICANS:

ORGANISE AGAINST AFROPHOBIA

"The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked with the total liberation of the African continent". Kwame Nkrumah

"There can be no black-white unity until there is first some black unity…. We cannot think of uniting with others, until after we have first united among ourselves. We cannot think of being acceptable to others until we have first proven acceptable to ourselves." Malcolm X

"The masses of the people of Africa are crying for unity. The people of Africa call for the breaking down of the boundaries that keep them apart." Kwame Nkrumah

"We regard it as the sacred duty of every African state to strive ceaselessly and energetically for the creation of a United States of Africa from Cape to Cairo and Madagascar to Morocco."
Robert Sobukwe