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***Inside this
issue***

Closing Schools to buy Time	1
R70 Billion for the Feeding trough	3
MARIKANA 2012: Brutality in defence of Capitalism.	3
Reflections on a tumultuous time	4

Closing Schools to buy Time

INTRODUCTION

Government's decision to close schools for a four-week period while the coronavirus pandemic rages, was generally seen as a common-sense move which would reduce the risk of infection, particularly among vulnerable communities around the country.

For those in favour, the overriding consideration is the saving of lives – most of which will be the lives of the poor and marginalised in society.

For those against, the closure is seen as an inconvenience, a violation of their right to uninterrupted privilege. And so, the party of the privileged – the DA – will be challenging the government's decision in court.

But we should not allow the noise of this debate to obscure the real problem. Coronavirus has shone a glaring light on the inequality and injustice of the whole schooling and social system in this country.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

As many commentators, particularly on the left, have repeatedly emphasized: the coronavirus pandemic and its devastating effects cannot be seen in isolation from the socio-economic conditions within which they occur.

Crises (of any kind) always sharply expose the underlying deficiencies (or "co-morbidities") bedeviling society. We saw this with the economic crisis of 2008, and we are seeing it now with the coronavirus pandemic.

Had we in South Africa been a more equitable society (not – as we currently are – the most unequal society

on earth) our capacity to fight the virus would have been that much more efficacious. Instead, we are seeing the systemic social deficits which 1994 did little to mitigate, simply being reproduced.

Credible estimates are that the official unemployment rate in the country will soon skyrocket to 50 percent; the economy is expected to contract by 7.2 percent in 2020 – the largest contraction in nearly 90 years – and the public debt will be touching R4 trillion, or 81.8 percent of GDP. Moreover, the country's capitulation to rampant corruption, especially in the public sector, and its inability to stabilize large SOE's like Eskom, will see a continued (if not accelerated) drain on the country's resources.

And with no vaccine or cure for COVID-19 yet in sight, things could get a whole lot worse. The World Bank is predicting the "deepest

global recession in eight decades.” If it is considered that SA’s place in the global economy is that of a supplier of raw materials, then the market for our products in the next few years is going to be totally depressed.

All this will have serious implications for class struggle. It means austerity with a capital A for countries of the global South. As Ghana’s finance minister has remarked, “while the rich countries were being permitted to grow debt to stimulate the economy, countries like Ghana were being told to stick to the rules, make their debt servicing payments and drive an austerity agenda.”

So, while populations in their billions the world over will be facing starvation on an unprecedented scale, the expectation is that the beneficiaries of neoliberal policies will continue to demand fiscal discipline, deregulated capital markets, balanced budgets and privatization of state assets.

The ANC government as well as all the groupings who participate in this country’s sham parliamentary democracy are committed first and foremost to upholding the capitalist order. Therefore, they will not take the necessary measures to dispossess the capitalist class. They will not even dare to raise the question of a wealth tax, or tighten the regulation on capital outflows. As agents of the capitalist class, they will turn increasingly to fascist solutions to maintain capitalism’s hegemony.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Now, more than ever, it will be necessary to raise the banner of socialism.

As Greg Dor puts it in a comment carried by Mail & Guardian on 13 May:

Socialism is not just a good idea, it is a basic requirement for the masses. It is a basic necessity. It is a real answer to the totalising problems faced by the millions. . . Only a workers’ government that upholds working class politics and prioritises meeting the needs of the working class can solve the totalising crisis of everyday life that millions and billions of people are forced to endure today.

Similar sentiments are echoed in the Unity Movement’s Ten Point Programme:

In the era of capitalist parliamentary democracy following the abrogation of apartheid legislation in South Africa, our struggle continues to be both the national and class struggle of a people dominated by imperialism. It is a struggle by the entire working class of this country for nothing less than total emancipation – emancipation from all forms of enslavement and victimization. It is an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle; it is a struggle for the socialist transformation of society.



CONCLUSION

So, what happens after 4 weeks of school closure? The government will be hoping that the curve will have begun to flatten, so that we can return to “business as usual.” For the oppressed, “business as usual” means ongoing poverty and deprivation.

While there might be good reason to breathe a sigh of relief in the event of victory over the virus, the ills in society will by no means have been eradicated. We would just have put out one fire.

A R70 BILLION BONANZA FOR THE FEEDING TROUGH

Ostensibly to assist South Africa in its fight against the coronavirus pandemic, the ANC government approached the IMF for a R70 billion loan – which was granted.

But there is widespread skepticism about who the real beneficiaries of this bounty will be. No sooner had the news of the loan come through than several cases of corruption/alleged corruption in the ranks of the ANC began to surface. For example, presidential spokesperson Khusela Diko's husband's company was awarded a juicy R125 million tender to provide Gauteng Province with PPE's. Two companies owned by the sons of former Free State premier and current ANC secretary-general, Ace Magashule, have clinched Covid-19 contracts with a combined value of R2.7 million. And none other than president Ramaphosa's son, Andile, has received R6 million of covid-19-related funding to "modify" Gauteng taxis.

The SA Council of Churches has slammed what it calls the "shameless looting of funds" through alleged irregularities in Covid-19 procurement processes. According to News24 (31 July 2020):

In a joint statement, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, Corruption Watch, Freedom Under Law, Johannesburg Against Injustice, Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse, Patriotic Movement, the South African Communist Party in Gauteng, and Section 27 said it was troubling that in Gauteng alone, some 91 companies who received purchase orders from the Department of Health were under investigation.

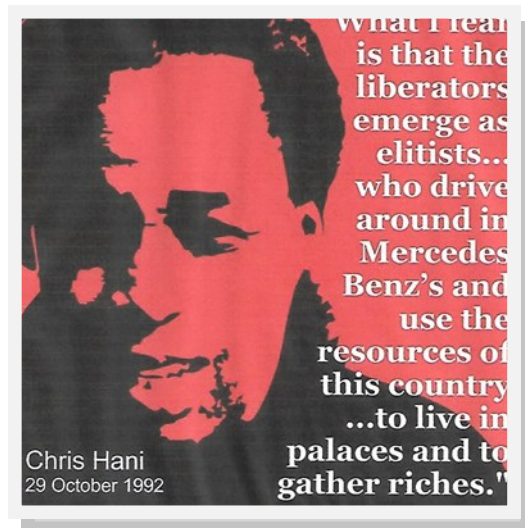
And yet, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Even prior to Zuma and the Guptas, SA had a reputation for corruption second to none.

It is no secret that state-owned enterprises including Eskom, SAA, Transnet, DENEL and SABC are facing serious financial problems as a result of rampant looting.

We will probably never have a proper accounting of just how much has been lost as a result of corruption in the public sector alone in this country over the last two-and-a-half decades. Ac-

ording to a statement by President Ramaphosa in December 2019, it has cost SA "close to R1 trillion." This is what R1 trillion looks like: R1 000 000 000 000

This is what the average monthly salary of a Pick n Pay shelf packer looks like: R3057



There is a popular saying: "You get the government you deserve."

This same ANC government presides over a country where (prior to the coronavirus pandemic) the official unemployment rate was nudging 30 percent, and now exceeds that figure. Present estimates put the number of unemployed in excess of 7 million people. It is estimated that some 23 percent-plus of South Africans live in squatter camps/informal settlements, with all that that entails in terms of exposure to crime, disease, poor-to-no service delivery, and other brutalities. At the other end of the social spectrum, the top 1% of South African earners take home almost 20% of all income in the country, while the top 10% take home 65%. The remaining 90% of South African earners get only 35% of total income. (ref: World Inequality Database, 2018).

Seriously, do we deserve this government? Or, more to the point, do we deserve this system – the capitalist system (since that is the real source of our current reality)?

MARIKANA 2012: BRUTALITY IN DEFENCE OF CAPITALISM

August has become one of the most shameful months in the history of the “new” South Africa. On August 16, 2012, police opened fire on a group of striking mineworkers at Marikana, killing at least 34 and injuring 78.

While the Farlam Commission of Enquiry into the massacre absolved the key political figures involved in the event – Cyril Ramaphosa (who was deputy state president at the time), Nathi Mthethwa (then police minister) and Susan Shabangu (then mineral resource minister) Ramaphosa’s role remains a contentious one.

At the time, he was a non-executive member of the board of Lonmin Mines, against whom the mine workers were striking in support of their demands for a wage increase and improved working conditions. In characterizing the strike not as a labour dispute, but as a “dastardly criminal act,” he contacted Mthethwa to bolster the number of police officers on the scene. It has been argued that this intervention on Ramaphosa’s part “made bloodshed more likely.”

It raises the question: why didn’t he – a former trade unionist and one renowned for his negotiating skills at Codesa – not seek to resolve the dispute via the established labour relations process?

The strike by the Lonmin mine workers was a wildcat strike, which is to say, it was taking place outside the legal framework created by the ANC-regime for controlling workers in the work place. If it succeeded, it would undermine that framework. At the time, Zwelinzima Vavi, who was then general-secretary of COSATU, remarked, “We are not saying that workers do not deserve their money, but if we are not careful this may mean an end [to] the central bargaining system in the country. Workers will just embark on wildcat strikes and steam ahead, and force us [union leaders] to follow them.”

Similarly, minister Shabangu pointed a finger at Impala, which, prior to the Lonmin conflict, had introduced two abnormal increases fol-

lowing a massive wildcat strike that ended in February 2012. This, she argued, was a signal for unofficial action elsewhere. . . she was raising the issue of threats to existing bargaining arrangements. . (Quoted from Peter Alexander, et al, 2013).

The tragedy at Marikana exposed the thin liberal veneer overlaying ANC rule; this is a government that will viciously defend the property rights of the capitalists. It is not a government of the working people.

Today this same Ramaphosa – former trade union leader and businessman – is a billionaire (estimated worth R6.4 billion in 2018) and is president of South Africa. The blood spilt at Marikana has done nothing to halt his progress in life.

Meanwhile, on August 16, 2019, IOL.co.za reported that “The families of the 34 mineworkers killed by police in Marikana are still looking to obtain justice and to be compensated by the government.”



Eight years on and still no justice for the miners of Marikana

REFLECTIONS ON A TUMULTUOUS TIME

I write this reflection on those "Six Days in August" (the title of a DVD by Mikale Barry), the Northern Areas uprising in 1990, with a visceral memory of that tumultuous time in our history.

We were living in Gelvandale, and shared the property we were renting with the Neethlings — Daphne, Clifford and their four young children.

On one of those six days, Daphne became a widow, and their four children fatherless, when Clifford became one of the early tragic casualties as the streets turned into a battleground.

Forty-nine lives were lost during those six days, and 120 businesses were damaged or destroyed in Schauderville, Gelvandale, West End, Arcadia and surrounding townships.

Lives and livelihoods were lost, never to be recovered.

Hundreds of people still carry the physical and psychological injuries inflicted during the conflict, with buildings, and bodies, left derelict, looking for ways to be repurposed.

Why did this happen? There are other articles, books and resources that recount the history of that time.

But at the root of this discontent that lay dormant, waiting to rise up, was the forced removal of people and families from their homes and communities in South End, Fairview, Willowdene, Salisbury Park, North End, Sidwell, and Central.

New townships that came to be known as the northern areas were set up to house those classified as coloured under the Population Registration Act, and to be segregated from their fellow South Africans by the infamous Group Areas Act of 1950.

This segregation was forcibly imposed from the day a person was born, in a segregated hospital, to the day they died and got buried, in a segregated graveyard.

In between birth and death, in these new congested townships, deprivations and discrimination in the form of inferior planning, facilities, service delivery, housing deficits, lack of ameni-

ties, access to health care, transport systems gave rise to growing social ills.

Community organisations such as civics, sports organisations, cultural organisations, trade unions and teachers' unions arose in resistance to the grand schemes of the Apartheid regime.

To quell the rising tide of resistance, the state attempted to consolidate its "divide and rule" strategy by putting in place a Tricameral Parliament in 1983, thinking that by giving the coloureds the (dummy) vote, they could fool people into believing they were participating in a democratic state.

The Coloured Labour Party, under the leadership of Allan Hendrickse and others of his ilk, readily complied to help implement this strategy.

The 1980s saw growing mobilisation against Labour Party complicity in the dummy Tri-Cameral Parliament (1983) and ineffective Coloured Management Committees.

By 1985 and the declaration of the state of emergency, many grass roots organisations were openly organising resistance to the state.

They included the UDF, Sacos, trade unions, civic, religious, youth and teacher/educator formations, many influenced by the underground ANC, the Unity Movement, those aligned to the Black Consciousness movement.

A co-ordinating committee of various resistance organisations was formed (the NACC) and led marches in Port Elizabeth, highlighting the housing crisis and demanding the disbanding of the Northern Areas Management Committee.

In Uitenhage, a similar scenario played out, exposing the complicity of the Labour Party's Management Committee.

The August 1990 Northern Areas uprising became the death warrant of the Labour Party and ushered in heightened demands for direct representation locally and nationally.

Though there are many in the Northern Areas who believe the area is a "special case" because of neglect by the new government, it may be argued that it is merely a microcosm of systemic

failure by the municipality and the state across all townships.

Today the neglect of the northern areas is tangible, worsening earlier social ills with rampant crime, drug and other abuses receiving national attention.

A Weekend Post article on August 1 headlined "Bethelsdorp comes out tops for all the wrong reasons" referred to this township as one that has one of the highest crime levels in SA.

Those living in Motherwell and elsewhere could similarly argue gross neglect in many respects, especially service delivery.

People's hopes and aspirations for tangible freedom and an egalitarian society seem more remote than ever.

It is clear that what WEB Du Bois noted in 1903 — "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" — is still valid in the 21st century.

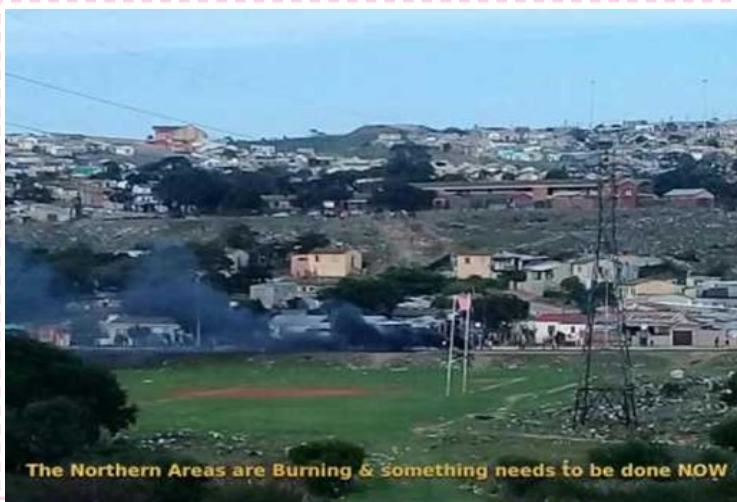
Our reality is that we have yet to engage deeply about building an all-inclusive SA nation (with our fellow Africans who have chosen to call SA home).

Some suggestions for a way forward:

- ◇ An integrated economic development and spatial plan is essential.
- ◇ High levels of unemployment are a breeding ground for continued dysfunctionality.
- ◇ Perceptions need to be addressed on the awarding of contracts that could alleviate localised unemployment.
- ◇ Provincial and local government need to immediately resolve outstanding issues such as the completion of work on schools.

◇ Communities require access to properly maintained and managed sport and culture facilities.

◇ Some have referred to the northern areas as a "ticking time bomb waiting to explode"



Though conditions continue to be dire, I do hope that prediction is incorrect as we should not need another Northern Areas uprising to be heard by the powers that be.

I invite scholars to consider postgraduate studies that could deepen our understanding of the

1990 uprising. The NAHHP archives housed at Nelson Mandela University are a good starting point.

- **Article by Allan Zinn, director, Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy**
- **The article was first published in *The Herald* as an Op-Ed on 6 August 2020.**

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