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We Fight Ideas with Ideas

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Tribute to Comrade Norman Abrahams

Dear Murial, Gehan, Marcelle and Family

I bring condolences from our President, Comrade Basil Brown and from all the members of the New Unity Movement. The loss you experience is immense, and we wish you warmth and strength at this time. The Unity Movement too, feels the loss of a comrade and friend who has been at the forefront of the struggle for emancipation for most of his life and has contributed greatly to the theory and praxis of the organisation.

We bring this tribute to Comrade Norman Abrahams by way of sharing with you some of Norman's involvement with the New Unity Movement.

Norman was a member of the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA). After political bannings, proscriptions and incarcerations of numerous of its members forced the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) underground and virtually out of existence, Norman took part in discussions in 1983 to re-establish the NEUM in the guise of the New Unity Movement (NUM). He has

been a loyal member of the NUM ever since and in particular, a member of the Southern Suburbs Branch of the NUM here in Cape Town. He served as the secretary of the Teachers' League for an extensive time and was a prolific contributor to the Teachers' League Journal as well as The Bulletin and The Worker publications of the New Unity Movement. He was also a long-time member of the Civic Movement in the Federation of Cape Civic Associations. Here he contributed regularly to civic news-



Comrade Norman Abrahams

letters for distribution. His commitment to the Unity Movement never wavered.

A humble person with a great sense of humour, Norman was first and foremost a teacher, an educator, an excellent educator. His teaching style in class was calm, collected and measured which reflected his personality. This is also true for his debates in meetings which assisted many in understanding the complexities of the cruel political world that we inhabit. Yet, he was never pedantic; a critical thinker who encouraged us to see the world against an anti-imperialist

backdrop.

He had the ability to see potential in others and was able to encourage nascent capabilities in especially our younger comrades. He would take them under his wing and be a mentor to ensure that they were aware that the world that the Unity Movement was fighting for did not consist of superior or inferior "races"; that all of humanity consisted of only one race, the human race; that human need should never be subsidiary to the production of

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material value for profit; and that an alternative world is possible.

Norman became a teacher at a time when formal Apartheid was beginning to take root and there was a full onslaught by the Afrikaner National Party Government against progressive education. The government's plan of separate development implied a retribalizing of South African society. Norman's teaching career kicked off when the government used the school syllabus to entrench the belief of the separateness of people and the acceptance and necessity of the social separation of people. This they underscored with the glaring discrimination in resources afforded to the schools of the different groups of people according to their population register.

This diabolical abuse of education was vehemently opposed by Norman and his comrades in the Teachers' League and other organisations. They had to, however, be careful. Many teachers were sacked, banned or imprisoned. Yet, many teachers of that time, like Norman, persisted and in many ways succeeded, by teaching outside and beyond the syllabus and resisting the retribalisation of society via the syllabus, to produce progressive and independent young men and women who were aware of the iniquities of a discriminatory and oppressive system, and who were prepared to fight to change it.

Norman's children and grandchildren should know that your father and grandfather was immensely proud of you. But, though he lived the motto of the Teachers' League of South Africa, "Let Us Live for Our Children", you certainly would have suffered the sacrifice of his time spent away from you due to organisational obligations. But, he loved you none the less.

Murial, your involvement and work in Non-Racial sport is well-known and complemented Norman's activities in the Unity Movement. We are grateful for the love that you shared.

We wish you warmth and comfort in the days ahead.

Mickey Titus
Secretary
15 January 2025

FROM THE TLSA/NUPSAW — Brian Isaacs

In 1996 I got to know him on a more personal level when he became involved in the Western Cape Parent, Teacher, Student Forum which opposed the rationalisation of 20 000 teachers in South Africa (9000 in the

Western Cape.) Again he was instrumental in promoting the concept of non-collaboration. He amongst others must take credit for this.

In 2012 he was a member of the Concerned Education Forum which fought against the closure of 27 schools in the Western Cape, and in 2020 he was part of the Progressive Education Forum (POF) which assisted schools during the Covid 19 Pandemic.

Norman was the secretary of the TLSA in the 1980's and 1990's. His work in the TLSA which later became the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers (NUPSAW) is well documented. He made a huge contribution to the TLSA and NUPSAW journals, commenting on many educational issues. He taught many comrades the importance of reading widely, analysing deeply but more importantly, putting ideas into action.

He played an important role in sport where once again he taught the concept of non-collaboration.

He was also a person who could bring himself down from deep philosophical thoughts to practical ideas.

FROM THE FEDERATION OF CAPE CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS

By Edwin Jacobs

Comrade Norman was indeed a dedicated teacher who lived for his children, a true comrade, a brilliant thinker and writer on complex matters of the day, an eloquent speaker, a distinguished freedom fighter and a true revolutionary. He was a great son of this country.

His role as a teacher, political activist and civic activist ideologue and leading member of the New Unity Movement and the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA) remains an example to us all.

Comrade Norman understood that the struggle needed to be waged on all fronts. On the civic front, he served the FCCA, via its former affiliate the Lansdowne Civic Association and made a vital contribution to the articles in the FCCA Newsletter.

He understood that the capitalist system would not be able to satisfy the needs of people. Today 30 years into the "New South Africa", his views have been vindicated. The oppressed majority continue to suffer the most under this so-called democratic capitalist system, which is responsible for poverty, inequality, unemployment and low wages.

GLOBAL WARMING: THE FUTURE IS ALREADY WITH US.

In 2012 Bill McKibben wrote an essay for Rolling Stone on the ‘terrifying new math’ of global warming: on their books, fossil fuel companies had reserves five times larger than what could be contained within a carbon budget for 2°C. If they had them extracted and burnt, the planet would go up in flames.

2024 was not only the hottest year since global temperature records began in 1850, but also the first year to pass the milestone of 1.5°C set by world leaders to try to limit the worst impacts of climate change.

The latest warning from Mother Nature that we are living dangerously is the rampant firestorm which recently engulfed much of southern California. But, of course, this is far from being the only or even most severe consequence we’ve suffered as a result of human-induced planetary heating. South Africa has not been immune; we have been experiencing more frequent and intense extreme weather events, water shortages, and rising temperatures.

Ominously, the impacts we are experiencing now are the result of *past* escalations in global temperatures. This means we are guaranteed to suffer more, possibly worse, consequences in the immediate future as a result of crimes against the earth which we have *already* committed.

Climate science is warning against the melting of polar ice and rising sea levels, and how these will lead to the swamping of low-lying countries and coastal habitats. Just to cite what is increasingly becoming a norm:

In 2021, in the Chinese province of Henan, a year’s worth of rain fell in three days – downpours ‘unseen in the last 1,000 years’ – but in southern Madagascar, drought forced eight in ten inhabitants to fill their stomachs with leaves, cacti and locusts. (from “Overshoot” by Andreas Malm and Wim Carton)

The most obvious way of fighting back would be for global society to simply stop emitting CO₂ and other substances causing global warming. In other words, a strategy of *mitigation*. However, there are powerful interests at work to prevent an immediate turn to mitigation. Thus, other (less efficacious) options are being touted, which include:

- Adaptation: Literally, finding ways to “live with” the consequences of global warming;
- Removal (or “carbon capture”) – of CO₂ from the atmosphere *after* it has been generated;
- Geo-engineering: That is, “putting some substances or objects into the stratosphere to block a portion of the incoming sunlight, thus causing temperatures on Earth to drop;”

Mitigation, as already indicated, means *discontinuing* to emit pollutants into the environment.



There is consensus in the scientific community that mitigation is the way to go, that we should rapidly be switching from the burning of fossil fuels (coal, gas, oil) to renewable options (solar, wind, tidal). Critically, it is already technically feasible to do so.

However, for the fossil fuel industry to halt in its tracks means self-destruction. Not only will it mean foregoing present profits, but also, it will mean leaving considerable wealth in the form of yet-unmined assets in the ground. For the class of investors who have already committed billions, this means voluntarily giving up their claims to future wealth. It is known as “asset stranding.”

Since to continue fuelling the fossil fuel industry (pun intended!) means we're on the path to planetary-destruction, it would be rational for all stakeholders to commit to a radical plan for transitioning to long-term sustainability (as mentioned, *we are capable of switching to renewables* – the option is feasible!).

But this is not in the nature of capitalism.

The newest subterfuge being touted is that of “overshoot.” This means it's OK to overshoot the red lines (of 1.5°C and 2.0°C) since *future technologies* (yet to be invented!!!) will ensure we can pull CO₂ and other harmful substances from the atmosphere, and bring global temperatures back within acceptable ranges!!!!

And so, the rationale is created for business-as-usual. To hell with the mass of the earth's inhabitants (human and other—most of whom are located in the so-called Global South, which is the least responsible for global warming). Let them adapt as best they can, even if it means their habitats are destroyed.

But as the runaway fires in LA and other natural disasters (e.g. flooding in the British countryside) attest, those populations comfortably ensconced in the Global North are becoming equally vulnerable.

America's POTUS has made it abundantly clear that he has no intention of respecting attempts to control global warming. He intends withdrawing the US from the Paris Climate Agreement, and is egging the fossil fuel industry on with his “drill, baby, drill!” incantation.

Frederic Jameson was right: “It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”

So, what is to be done?

We have to play our role in rapidly *politicising* the issue of global warming, to strengthen global resistance. The

SA economy is hugely dependent on the coal-mining industry, and the GNU is doing little or nothing to hasten our transition to a carbon-free future. Clearly, exposing and protesting this should be our starting point.

(For an informed analysis of the current climate breakdown crisis, readers are referred to the book, “Overshoot,” by Andreas Malm and Wim Carton).



WORKER STRUGGLES IN THE GIG ECONOMY

In the December 2024 *Worker* (No. 121) we discussed how work was being increasingly casualised via the so-called Gig Economy and “platform work,” and how this was intensifying the exploitation of workers. We quoted Michelle Hassan:

South Africa has seen a substantial rise in the gig economy, particularly in urban areas. In 2021, 3.9 million gig workers constituted 1% of the workforce, with a predominant demographic of individuals under 30 concentrated in major urban hubs like Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Gig work includes short-term tasks for digital platforms like Uber, Uber Eats, and Sweep South, as well as location-bound work like taxi driving, delivery, and cleaning.

A critical consequence of this is that the (growing number of) affected workers do not have access to “traditional” forms of representation/struggle/resistance. As commentators Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham (2020) put it:

The widespread use by platforms of self-employed independent contractor status not only creates the conditions of low pay and precarious work . . . but also creates significant barriers to traditional forms of trade unionism.

The heyday of formal, institutionalised trade unionism was the mid-to-late twentieth-century, when large-scale industrialisation was driven by the “golden age of capitalism” following WW2, including rapid industrial growth in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Post-apartheid South Africa “inherited” the tradition of formalised alliances between capital and labour, as manifested in the establishment of Nedlac. Large scale manufacturing (including mining and agriculture) was favourable to labour-organising, as it brought large numbers of workers together in the workplace, thus facilitating union formation.

Automation technology (including AI) has been ushering in a post-industrial era (some analysts prefer to regard the general decline of industrial forms of production as a return to a *pre-industrial* era). This has been accompanied by a decline in trade unionism (certainly in trade union membership) and in the relative power which unions wielded in securing decent pay and working conditions for workers.

By contrast, in many cases workers in today’s growing platform industries are not even regarded by their employers as workers – terms such as “freelancers,”

“associates,” and “independent contractors” are used to mask their role as workers, and in the process, subject them to ultra-levels of exploitation. For example, in these sectors, work is “temporary, unstable, and patch-worked. It entails workers spending less time at one job, a risk of time spent without income, workers undertaking more jobs (possibly at the same time), and unpaid time spent searching for tasks or gigs.” (Woodcock, 2021)

As also mentioned in our article in *Worker* 121 “the



workers must themselves provide their own “means of production” – Uber drivers must use their own cars and purchase the necessary fuel. And platform workers need to provide their own computers, internet connections, and electricity.” Needless to say, contractual benefits such as pension, medical aid and paid leave of any kind are foreign to this environment.

The question arises: how do workers in the gig economy resist (as resist they certainly will)?

There is an emerging literature focusing on exploring this question, both at a theoretical level and in identifying actual examples of worker resistance in action.

The following brief discussion draws on some of this literature.

Traditional forms of struggle, of course still apply in formal sectors. One need only think of a Nedlac or a Cosatu and the existence of established legal machinery designed to control or minimise

disruptiveness emanating from labour disputes. Gig workers do not have access to such machinery. They have not been able to form large, powerful trade unions. Their occupational reality mitigates against this. One obvious reason is because they have little opportunity to meet in large, stable numbers, and therefore to plan and organise united action, such as strikes and sit-ins.

However, as we in SA (particularly in the larger cities) have observed, food delivery workers usually gather outside shopping malls and fast-food outlets waiting for gigs. Thus, there is some opportunity to interact, build relationships, and to organise, albeit minimal compared with a factory setting.

And then, of course, social media platforms such as WhatsApp provide further opportunities to build “communities of contact,” Communication technology makes it possible for workers to form networks and alliances, even though they might be dispersed across the entire globe.

Maurizio Atzeni and Lorenzo Cini in their informative article “New theories and politics for working class organizing in the gig and precarious world of work” (Sage Journals, October 2023) provide a number of actual examples of gig worker mobilisations in many countries across a number of continents. Critical conclusions they draw from their observations include:

“*Supportive communities*” and “*political activism traditions*” have become central mechanisms for successful worker mobilisations in the gig economy.

Supportive communities include neighbourhood and other solidarity groups and contacts. “These can be family and communal bonds, neighbourhood contacts, political or social organisations, knowledge of a region or neighbourhood or relations to family members in other regions or countries.”

“*Political activism traditions*,” according to Atzeni and Cini “may consist of political activists and their backgrounds, their experiences of activism, and their informal organizations (e.g. collectives, social spaces, associations) embedded in the mobilization context.”

This would highlight the need for the building of a strong community-based “BDS movement” in support of worker struggles in the gig/precarious economy, and presages greater levels of integration between various forms of struggle among the oppressed.

Thus, if such a tendency grows, what will grow with it will be *class consciousness*. This is because worker struggles would broaden to include a focus on more than just work-related demands, and would include a focus on broader social issues as a whole (e.g. community-based housing and service delivery, climate change, fascism, imperialism ...) Workers will struggle not only to improve their lot within the system but will also strive to fundamentally *change* the system.



THE WATER CRISIS – COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED

Everyone has the right to sufficient food and water. The Water Services Act provides for the rights of access to basic water supply and basic sanitation. Sufficient water and an environment not harmful to health or well-being are absolutely necessary.

What is causing the water crisis in South Africa?

South Africa's historical geospatial apartheid planning has left many areas of the poor and particularly the rural areas without basic water provision and sanitation. This, however did not seem to be a priority until now for the present ruling class.

Municipalities should be planning their water services development in order to realise the rights enshrined in the Water Services Act. The municipalities, largely dysfunctional, have over the last 30 years given scant attention to infrastructure and to the uneven allocation of resources.

South Africa's population in 1994 was estimated to be about 43 million. Continuous growth has resulted in the estimated population of the country being at 63 million in 2024. The demand for adequate water and sanitation resources has therefore increased.

Limitations to increased adequate water resources are caused by a number of factors:

- Increased demand (Population growth)
- Drought (Climate change)
- Pollution (Poor Management)
- Lack of infrastructure. (Poor planning)

Whilst the growth in population was a factor to be taken into account, millions of South Africans were not only disadvantaged by virtue of their colour, but also for more than 300 years, by lack of resources such as water and sanitation provision, electricity, housing, transport, health, education, were victims of inequality, degradation and discrimination. All of these and so much more needed attention.

The observed water scarcity in South Africa is not exclusively attributable to physical drivers. It also has economic causes. Economic water scarcity is caused by a lack of investment in infrastructure or technology to draw water from rivers, aquifers or other water sources.

Allied to the '*Land Question*' is the provision of water. Access to clean water is a universal human right. By not heeding the warnings of impending water shortages and not planning to supplement the dammed-up river water by

timeously searching for alternative water sources, are as good as denying people access to water. In the absence of ready access to fresh water, people's lives are impoverished. The quality of sanitation, ablution and sewage removal declines leading to poor personal hygiene and an increase in microbial diseases.

There are more than 5 000 dams registered in South Africa, 320 of these dams are owned by the state. That is where water for use by the public comes from. The country's water resources should not be privately owned. Because water is a necessity and access to it a human right, all water resources belong to the citizens of the country. It is imperative that the state exercises proper care and management over water and ensures adequate availability to all people.

A disproportionate bulk of our available water is supplied to the business sector. The mines use vast quantities of water but the major part of the profits of mining activities lands in the pockets of a few. The wine, beer, spirit and beverage industries, the water bottling companies are allowed to purchase unlimited amounts of water for sale to the public. Billions of litres of water are for sale to those who can afford it, even during the acute periods of drought.

Now that we have a crisis, huge hikes in water tariffs suddenly become acceptable. Soon privatisation will look like an acceptable option. Is the water crisis going to be used to sell our water resources to big business so that we have to pay exorbitant prices for what is a universal human right and make a few people very rich? This is the normal route to privatisation of state-owned entities: make it unworkable, cause great anger and frustration, the populace starts clamouring for privatisation.

Deteriorating water infrastructure (water provision and sanitation maintenance) including leakages in cities, towns and dorp/villages is a serious problem. Thousands of litres of water are lost every day in the cities. It is estimated that 35% of the inflow into the piped water system in Johannesburg is lost through leakages. In the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality according to their annual draft report of 2022/2023, recorded water losses amounted to 43,721 megalitres. The cost to the city equated to R250 million.

Over a number of years, we have had floods in the summer months in KZN and the Northern provinces, much like the floods in winter months in the Western Cape. Rain harvesting and the building of dams have been sadly neglected in SA. With a water scarce country like SA, this is inexplicable.

Since 1994, only *one dam* has been constructed from scratch, the De Hoop Dam, on the iNdubazi or Tubatse/Steelpoort River, near Burgersfort, Limpopo. The fast-flowing rivers on the eastern seaboard of SA can easily host a number of dams.

The country's economic hub, cities in the Gauteng Province, Johannesburg and Tshwane are plagued by intermittent water outages. The Hammanskraal incident, which erupted with an outbreak of cholera, was further contaminated by the poor quality of water from the Rooiwal Wastewater treatment plant. Although dams in the Gauteng region were full, intermittent supply of water to Johannesburg led to water outages for 2 – 3 days. Water resources are poorly managed and decaying infrastructure adds to the problem.

In Cape Town, with the recent (2015 – 2018) drought, dams ran dry. Long queues of citizens were found at natural springs. When Day Zero was almost upon the citizens, the farmers released water from their private dams upstream from the state owned dams into the rivers to augment the water in the dams supplying the city with water, thus avoiding Day Zero. Why are all dams in the country not nationalised?

Many of the towns in the Eastern Cape have been without water for weeks on end. Most of the affected towns like Komani (formerly known as Queenstown) and Makhanda (Grahamstown), Pearston, Nxuba (Cradock)

and Middelburg are regularly without water. This is mainly due to ageing infrastructure (burst pipes, inoperable valves etc.) and of course general neglect. Dams near to Komani are apparently full but on most days, water is only available for an hour at 03:00/04:00. After an hour, taps run dry. Many rivers are contaminated by animal faeces and other impurities – this, particularly in the deep rural areas where there is no sanitation and no potable water.

The GNU has now decided that water is a priority, unfortunately, this is much too late. The crisis is upon us.

The Northern Cape has several aquifers, including the huge Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer that stretches from Namibia into Botswana to the Karoo Plateau. The largest aquifer in South Africa stretches from Cape Town to Gqeberha, with another covering the Cape Flats. The aquifers covering the Witwatersrand have been largely contaminated by heavy metals and acidic water, thanks to the legacy of gold and platinum mining. However, if treated with expensive chemicals and processes, it can still be used.

Climate change is going to play a major part in future water management. Investment in water conservation, desalination plants, rain harvesting and seeking other sources of water are going to be critical.

The path to water self-sufficiency is strewn with obstacles:

For one, we are going to have to secure loans from predatory lending agencies such as the IMF and World Bank, and possibly the global capital markets.

We cannot rule out corruption, incompetence, foot-dragging and favouritism in the management of the development project.

For these reasons, it is going to be critical for communities through their grassroots organisations to play a more direct role in the decision-making process, and to ensure social needs are at all times the predominant consideration.

FROM 90 TO 89 SECONDS TO MIDNIGHT ...

The Doomsday Clock (created by the Bulletin of Atomic Sciences) is a symbol that represents the likelihood of a human-made global catastrophe. Set at 90 seconds in January 2024, it meant that we were 90 seconds away from a global catastrophe of historic proportions.

On 28 January 2025, the clock was updated. It is now set at 89 seconds to midnight - THE CLOSEST THE WORLD HAS EVER BEEN TO MIDNIGHT.

In 2021 and 2022, the clock was set at 100 seconds, and in 2023 and 2024, at 90 seconds. Clearly, we are moving in the wrong direction.

In our August 2024 Worker (No 117) we discussed the implications. In this issue, we insert the following quote from a short article by Rhiannon Ingle (28 January 2025):

"In setting the Clock one second closer to midnight, we send a stark signal: Because the world is already perilously close to the precipice, a move of even a single second should be taken as an indication of extreme danger and an unmistakable warning that every second of delay in reversing course increases the probability of global disaster," The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists warn.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists further explained that today's Clock setting [28 January 2025] will have considered 'multiple global threats' including 'the proliferation of nuclear weapons, disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence, the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas war, Israel-Hezbollah conflict, bio-threats and the continued climate crisis.

And now, with Trump in the White House, there is certainly cause for alarm, particularly given his open commitment to a fascist agenda (greater repression of progressive forces and civil rights at home, greater support for the genocidal regime in Tel Aviv, mass deportation of migrants, threats to Panamanian and Denmark sovereignty, commitment to fossil fuels over renewables, clemency for January 6, 2021 rioters ... the list goes on.)

We need to join our efforts to those of all progressive forces, globally, to counter this dangerous trend—to reverse the direction of the Clock.



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