

INTERVIEW

South Africa's new revolt against austerity - Mass workers' mobilization on April 25

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South Africa is once again being rocked by protest and upheaval. President Cyril Ramaphosa, who took office on February 15, replacing Jacob Zuma, now faces a rebellion within the union movement over proposed changes to the labor laws that are viewed as giveaways to big business and an attack on the working class.

Zuma was forced out of office amid accusations of corruption, and Ramaphosa has promised to rid the government of the cloud that looms over the presidency. But, housecleaning notwithstanding, the new president's agenda remains closely tied to the interests of South Africa capital, extractive multinationals and other major investors in the country.

While South Africa's mineral wealth is valued at approximately \$3 trillion, unofficial reports put unemployment at around 40 percent. The persistence of impoverished conditions—from housing to health care and jobs—has sparked a vibrant social movements and strikes across society, with South Africa being dubbed “the protest capital of the world.”

Trevor Ngwane is a South African socialist who has been active in trade unions and political organizations for two decades, a period that spanned the fall of apartheid and the period that followed. He is currently a researcher and postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. He spoke with **Lee Wengraf**, author of *Extracting Profit: Imperialism, Neoliberalism and the New Scramble for Africa*, about the mass workers' mobilization across South Africa on April 25.

Lee Wengraf - YOU WERE part of the organizing committee for the massive march on April 25 and the national strike called by the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). But before talking about that, could you give a quick overview of the role that the African National Congress (ANC) has played since the fall of apartheid?

Trevor Ngwane - THE ANC has done some good things. For example, with Nelson Mandela at its head, it put together and led the first democratic government in South Africa in 1994. Part of its job was to get rid of all of the racist laws, or race-based laws, which it did.

It also came up with progressive policies concerning things like gender issues. For example, gay marriages are allowed in South Africa. It also came up with some programs around social issues, such as water, electricity and health.

The downside has been that, even as the ANC was doing that, it moved away from a social democratic or social welfare state approach to the economy and into a neoliberal framing of it. In 1996, it adopted a program that was neoliberal and abandoned a more social democratic economic policy.

As a result, we see the prioritization of capital and profit over the needs of the people, in the form of privatization, financialization and corporatization of government services. So this has been a problem, because it has meant people losing secure access to basic things like water, electricity, housing, health care and education.

HOW HAS the trade union movement responded to this challenge? COSATU [Congress of South African Trade Unions], the major trade union federation, has historically been very close to the ANC, but now there's an important new federation, SAFTU. How have the unions typically taken up this challenge and what are some of the dynamics that are unfolding today around this question?

UNFORTUNATELY, COSATU—which, as you say, is in alliance with the ANC and is the main organization within the labor movement—has been timid in its response to neoliberal policies. Its hands have been tied by its recognized desire to be in the good books of the ANC.

So for example, it has largely played the role of containment—containing labor militancy as people questioned anti-working-class policies. It has also failed to reach out to the unemployed and to working-class communities for a combined or unified strategy against attacks on standards of living, social services, etc.

However, as a result, contradictions within its alliance with the ANC and within COSATU itself emerged. A few years ago, we saw the biggest affiliate of COSATU, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), expelled from COSATU. Later, COSATU even expelled its own general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi.

NUMSA and Vavi and some other unions founded a new trade union federation, SAFTU, the South African Federation of Trade Unions, which called the general strike on April 25. So there's a realignment of social forces and political dynamics in the labor movement in South Africa.

CAN YOU say a little bit about the new presidency of Cyril Ramaphosa and how this factored into SAFTU's call for strike on April 25?

RAMAPHOSA'S PROJECT is to contain and tame labor. Remember that in 2012, we had the Marikana massacre. In that strike, platinum miners were demanding an end to the cheap labor system that we inherited from apartheid.

The response of the ANC government was to shoot and kill 34 strikers. They did that prompted by Cyril Ramaphosa personally, who was an executive director at Lonmin, the company against which the workers were striking. Ramaphosa put pressure on the government to deal more harshly with the strikers, and his actions more or less led to the massacre.

Ramaphosa, who before this was a billionaire capitalist, is now the president of the country. But unlike Trump, he's no fool and has excellent credentials in the struggle. However, he is a neoliberal, and it's clear that the working class now faces a formidable opponent.

He is a champion of the amendments to the labor laws, which basically amount to restricting the right to strike. The strike was called against the amendments advocated by Ramaphosa.

CAN YOU describe the minimum-wage proposal, and why there is so much opposition to that part of the bill?

THERE ARE three components of the labor bills Ramaphosa is championing: the national minimum wage, restrictions on strikes and a change in the collective bargaining rules.

The labor movement embraces and wants a national minimum wage in the country. However, Ramaphosa is setting it too low, at 20 Rand per hour, which amounts to about \$1.60—with some workers, like domestic workers, getting about \$1 a day.

The general strike was against what is viewed as a starvation-level national minimum wage. But also, during the strike in Marikana, which resulted in the massacre, the miners were demanding 12,500 Rand a month, which amounts to about \$1,000 a month or a threefold increase in their wage.

Basically, workers were demanding not what they thought the boss could give, but based on their needs. There's a mood among the working class now to fight for their needs—and the national minimum wage is seen as an insult to this.

ON THE one hand, Ramaphosa comes from the trade union movement historically and has put sort of a “left” veneer on these policies. At the same time, he's behind Marikana, has put through these new restrictive laws and represents the billionaire class in South Africa. What is the public perception of Ramaphosa, and what kinds of challenges or opportunities do you think that poses for the left?

WE MUST distinguish between the public opinion of what I would call the working class and the poor, and then the middle class, especially the upper middle class. The opinions aren't the same, but remember that the middle class has quite a bigger voice—they dominate the media, and they have a degree of influence over the working class and the poor.

Ramaphosa took over from Jacob Zuma. Zuma was not able to finish his term of office as president because of accusations of corruption. In South Africa, it is called “state capture,” whereby crony capitalists manipulate state structures and government contracts to line their pockets.

There was a big movement in South Africa—across classes by the way—against this corruption. So when Ramaphosa took over from Zuma, there was a sense of relief among the working class and a great hope among the middle class and the upper middle class, certainly by the bosses, that Ramaphosa was going to sort out the economy.

Zuma was projected as this rustic, Trump-like figure, this rustic man with four wives, speaks Zulu, a kind of “backward”-looking president. So the upper middle class thinks Ramaphosa is the answer. But the working class remembers Ramaphosa as the butcher of Marikana, so they don't have much hope.

At the march that I attended on April 25 in Johannesburg, which [had] between 10,000 and 15,000 people, many of the songs were against Ramaphosa, and many of them were about the Marikana massacre. So ordinary workers don't trust Ramaphosa.

CAN YOU speak a little bit more about the organizing that went into the April 25 mobilization? I know you were central to that. How did the call for the strike come about, and how was the coalition around that built? And what's your assessment of the results?

IT'S INTERESTING how the coalition was built and how the strike was built because now SAFTU seems as if they were the key players. They were indeed the key players, because they are a big

trade union federation, but the coalition was initiated by the Casual Workers' Advice Office, which is a small, NGO-like, left organization that works with precarious workers.

They called a meeting, and various organizations including unions and community organizations attended, and then they put forward their concern about the impending labor bills that were going to be passed on May 1, May Day.

They felt that the union movement was doing nothing about these labor bills. And the worst part was that COSATU was apparently a signatory to the labor bills, having agreed, behind the backs of its own members, to these changes.

The message was well received, and the coalition was formed. Another union called GIWUSA [General Industries Workers Union]; United Front, which organizes communities; and other organizations joined the coalition.

In the process of forming the coalition, SAFTU was also invited and attended, and it was discovered that SAFTU had a certificate for a general strike. This became the basis for organizing around a general strike.

There was a lot of debate inside the coalition: To what extent should SAFTU be the face of the strike? But in the end, we thought that SAFTU should be the face of the strike because we wanted SAFTU to be a strong, fighting, militant trade union federation as an alternative for COSATU. So this is how the strike was actually organized.

And Vavi, the SAFTU general secretary, played his part. He is a good public speaker. I remember that twice, he woke up with us at 5 a.m., to hand out pamphlets. This is how the strike was built.

But I must emphasize that it wasn't so much the job done by SAFTU, but the general mood in the working class. Of course, someone must call a strike, but the response was more than what even the SAFTU leaders expected. The workers are angry, and they want to take action and fight for their rights.

I KNOW that there were other industries and workplaces that were shut down, and the bus drivers were on strike at the same time. Have you heard any estimates of how many people overall stayed away from their jobs that day?

I WOULD say that in the industrial heartland near Johannesburg, where there are lots of metal industries, the shutdown was about 80 percent. Certainly there were no workers in the city center on the day of the strike.

It was maybe 40 percent participation in smaller cities like Cape Town and Durban, and it could be higher in cities like Port Elizabeth because NUMSA is strong there—that's where you find the car manufacturing industries. So I'd say that in general, it was maybe 60 percent stay-away, which is a huge success, because, remember, we have this problem of flexible, casual, precarious workers who are sometimes not that keen to go on strike.

WHAT DO you think the actions on April 25 indicate for the prospects for the left—both the labor left and the radical, revolutionary left—and what are some of the next steps from your perspective?

FIRST, FOR the labor movement organizationally, it is about a baptism of fire for a new trade union federation, SAFTU, and the pushing aside of COSATU—although COSATU won't disappear, but I think it has been shown to be a "lame duck."

Secondly, the strike showed the extent of anger and combativity among the working class. It might even be a marker for a turning point in the class struggle, in the sense that with the global economic crisis, we can expect more attacks on workers' living standards. Already, Ramaphosa has increased the level of VAT [value-added tax] from 14 percent to 15 percent, which is a direct attack on the poor.

Also, there is a general mood in the townships and in the villages of South Africa, where there is a lot of protest actions by working-class communities. And these protest actions, although they are fragmented, seem to be changing their character.

In the last week, in the province called North West, where you have the platinum mines, the people marched and demanded the removal of their premier, the equivalent of the governor. The governor has been forced to step down and I think will be replaced soon.

I think that the working-class movement is finding strength, and the strike is giving it what I can call a center of authority—where the workers and unemployed fighting in different parts of the country feel that they are part of a bigger movement to improve their lives.

P.S.

* May 17, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/05/17/south-africas-new-revolt-against-austerity>

* Transcription by Jordan Weinstein and Charles Holm.