

# WORKERS WORLD NEWS



ALTERNATIVES TO GLOBALISATION

ISSUE 111 | DECEMBER 2018

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## THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT OF THE INVISIBLE AND EXCLUDED



ARO's first dialogue with the public, Jozi Book Fair, 02 September 2018, Source: Elijah Kodisang/ARO

**On 2nd September 2018 at the Jozi Book Fair, African Reclaimers Organisation introduced itself to the broader public as the first organisation of Reclaimers that united those who work in landfill sites and in streets.**

The Reclaimers decided to frame this organisation as **African** because it incorporates all those who are engaged in the recycling trade

regardless of their nationality. ARO started life as the Interim Johannesburg Reclaimers Committee (IJRC) and was formed initially to respond to the City of Johannesburg's decision to displace informal recyclers who collect in the streets by paying private companies to collect recyclables from high-income areas in the city. The City pays these companies to do the work that Reclaimers do for free.

After repeated appeals for discussion on the then proposed tenders and the possible affect they would have on the livelihoods of thousands of people who depend on collecting, transporting, sorting and selling recyclables, the City continued to sign contracts with two

private companies. Recyclers were forced to call the first-ever march of the landfill and street recyclers in July 2017. We managed to stop two of the contracts, however, another two were signed. The affects of these contracts have been devastating to the incomes of informal reclaimers. Their incomes have declined by over 60% in all areas where private companies were introduced. Research by CSIR has shown that close to 90 000 South Africans work as informal recyclers collecting close to 90% of all materials that are recycled. South Africa is ranked third behind countries such as Sweden regarding its recycling rates. These impressive rates are almost all entirely due to

**Continued on page 2...**

informal recyclers who form the foundation of the recycling economy but are often ignored by policy-makers and industry.

ARO wants to change all this. We want South Africa to increase its recycling rates and for informal recyclers to be paid for the free labour they provide, which is the foundation of the recycling economy worth hundreds of millions of rands. We collect, sort, transport and sell materials, saving the state and private industry millions and extending the life of landfills. We perform a vital environmental service, removing thousands of tons of discarded materials every year. Amongst us are university drop-outs, former teachers, ex-mine workers, ex-offenders looking to make an honest living, young people, older people and the precariously employed. Most of us are not looking to be employed by government or private companies, we just want to make a living and be self-employed. We also want to work with residents to make ourselves known as people who share your streets and also want to remove the stigma that our work brings. We are not drug addicts, most of us are men and women with families who work hard to make a living. We support our children to fund their schooling, we feed and clothe them and we never collect waste. We collect that which is of value but is discarded by many in society. We look forward to meeting residents, industry and government and to make our struggles and contributions to society known.

With ARO we are no longer in the shadows and we look forward to meeting you.

## HOW WE ORGANISE

Organising people who work for themselves has not been easy. In landfill sites, the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA), together with Groundwork, started organising Reclaimers a few years ago. Therefore, those in landfills have a history of being organised, including attempts to form cooperatives to improve incomes. However, these organising efforts were confined to landfills. WIEGO employed an organiser, whose mandate was to organise Reclaimers and to enable them to intervene in processes towards integrating informal Recyclers. The process of organising people who did not view themselves as part of collective processes has taken a year-and-a-half to achieve. This has been done through meeting workers where they live, work or sell their recyclable materials. The kinds of issues that workers rallied around moved quickly from a focus on preventing the City from signing contracts with private companies to dealing with issues of housing, evictions, violence, xenophobia, police harassment etc. A dedicated team of Reclaimer activists accompanied the organiser throughout and have thus become capable activists who can respond to any issue. The strategy of organising around workers as total beings and

not confining interventions to 'work' issues has built levels of confidence and resulted in workers deciding to form an organisation that will represent all Reclaimers regardless of their affiliation to existing organising initiatives or nationality. The team works by building workers' confidence by defending them against evictions, police harassment and attempts at excluding them from the recycling economy that is worth hundreds of millions annually. Examples of these include mounting *counter-patrols* in wealthy suburbs where Reclaimers are often removed and harassed by private security companies from these enclosed spaces of privilege and we insist that they continue working.

**WE PERFORM A VITAL ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICE, REMOVING THOUSANDS OF TONS OF DISCARDED MATERIALS EVERY YEAR.**

ARO is still in its infancy and is rooting itself within these marginalised communities, whilst building a layer of activists from the bottom up. In this process, it tackles many social and political problems thrown up by deep structural inequality in the country and across the region. In the space of less than two years, it is instilling hope and showing that organising, solidarity and unity can lead to changes happening.



Reclaimers at work, Goudkoppies, 18 August 2018, Source: Elijah Kodisang/ARO

# BUILDING AUTONOMY THROUGH ECOLOGY IN ROJAVA

Before years of war devastated northern Syria, decades of capitalist exploitation by the Syrian state created the ecological disaster the people of Rojava face today. Through wheat monoculture, oil extraction, and neglect of waste management planning, the Syrian state left the region with growing ecological problems. Simultaneously, the Turkish government has expanded dam projects along rivers running south into northern Syria for decades, making it harder for people to grow food and be self-sustainable.

When Rojava was liberated from direct Syrian government control in 2012, this set off a political revolution towards a self-organized democratic society across northern Syria. In 2016, 151 delegates from various northern regions of the Syrian state, including Rojava, proclaimed autonomy through the creation of the 'Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava'. Revolutionary forces throughout Rojava continue building an autonomous democratic society today.

After decades of destructive colonial policies and war, the Internationalist Commune of Rojava – a self-organised collective of internationalists from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europa, America and Oceania established in 2017 – in cooperation with the Ecology Committee of the Cizire Canton, began taking direct action to protect the region's autonomy. Out of the rubble of war-torn cities, the people of Rojava launched an ecological campaign to develop solutions to these problems and "Make Rojava Green Again".

The ecological campaign is addressing issues related to cultivation of food, reforesting large swaths of land, providing alternative forms of electricity, limiting fossil fuel usage, preserving the water supply, and even developing waste management solutions. Many of the local committee members are young adults who consider themselves responsible for building a more just social and economic system that functions in balance with nature. The women's liberation movement in Rojava also plays an important role in operating ecological pilot projects, such as agricultural cooperatives. The Internationalist Commune is made up of individuals from around the world who have traveled to Rojava to support the revolution with their expertise, ideas, and labor. Internationals organizing with local communities in Rojava are working to support ecological projects, expand awareness, and build a healthy future across the region. The campaign is still very new and much work still lies ahead.

Developing urban agriculture is one tier in the ecological campaign to expand food security and autonomy in Rojava. Decades of monoculture –

which has long been common policy supported by the Assad government, which has controlled Syria since 1971 – and the use of artificially supplied water and chemical fertilizers has degraded the soil and made cultivation of food impossible in some areas. The Internationalist Commune plans to create rooftop gardens and plant on undeveloped land within cities, which will further decentralize agriculture across Rojava. The return to traditional organic fertilizer-based agriculture is also a solution being put into practice by the Internationalist Commune.

In Rojava, access to sustainable sources of water is yet another ecological issue the Internationalist Commune is working to overcome. Climate change has contributed to the problem by shortening the rainy season across the region, which has decreased the amount of rainfall and lowered groundwater levels. At the same time, Turkey has built dams upstream along the Euphrates and Xabur tributary, actively restricting the flow of water south into Rojava. To promote sustainable use of water for growing crops, the Agricultural Protection Committee has registered all water wells, prohibited further expansion of wells for agriculture and limited the planting of crops requiring irrigation to 60%. Plans have been implemented to begin using greywater (water from showers, the kitchen, etc) and blackwater (from toilets) for organic fertilization of agriculture.

The Internationalist Commune is developing plans to expand public transportation as a method to minimize this impact on the health of locals and environment. In addition, the ecological campaign is planting trees by thousands to help improve urban air quality.

The supply of electrical power to many regions of Rojava is a primary hurdle in sustaining autonomous self-governance. Rojava currently derives electricity from three primary sources: hydro-electric power plants, natural gas, and diesel generators. Much of the electrical infrastructure, such as power lines and substations, has been destroyed after years of war across the region. The Internationalist Commune, with strong support from the Ministry of Energy, is developing plans to create a more decentralized and sustainable infrastructure. The development of the first wind power pilot project in Rojava has begun, which will serve as a working example for communities throughout the region. Volunteers are also working to create decentralized solar solutions, using photovoltaic technology, which will provide alternative sources of power and water heating systems.

The Internationalist Commune believes this will reduce community dependency on both

centralized electricity grids and fossil fuels. The Internationalist Commune in Rojava is simultaneously moving forward on plans for managing organic (food, paper, etc) and non-organic waste (plastic, metal, etc). Methods are being developed to sort, separate, and store all types of waste instead of burning or burying the waste, which causes air pollution and contamination of ground water. Organic waste is cleaned and stored for composting, and plans are underway to recycle all non-organic waste. Hazardous waste is stored far away from water sources to avoid contamination.

Such a massive ecological overhaul within Rojava will not be accomplished overnight. One essential pillar in maintaining self-governance throughout the region is community education. Success for an ecological revolution in Rojava will come from sharing concrete experiences and skills at all levels of society. The Internationalist Academy will be the center of this effort and will train individuals in the principles of self-organization, women's liberation, ecology, language, and culture. Students at the academy will participate in lectures and discussions at youth centers, municipalities, schools, and other institutions, to further develop what an ecological society in Rojava can look like and how to build it. International volunteers skilled in sanitation, renewable energy, mechanical and electrical engineering, and even physicists, chemists, and biologists continue to travel to Rojava to assist the construction of an autonomous ecological society. The academy hopes to build awareness throughout the region to "overcome the ecological and social crisis" which they see is "brought about by capitalist modernity", and promotes the destruction of nature and humanity.

"THE LAND MUST BE DEFENDED OR THERE WILL NOT BE A PLACE FOR THE REVOLUTION" – INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNE OF ROJAVA

Adapted from: <https://unicornriot.ninja/2018/building-autonomy-ecology-rojava/>



Selecting seeds at a tree nursery in Qamishlo canton, Rojava, Credit: mesopotamia.coop



# ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE SHOULD BE EVERYONE'S CONCERN!

BY FERRIAL ADAM\*

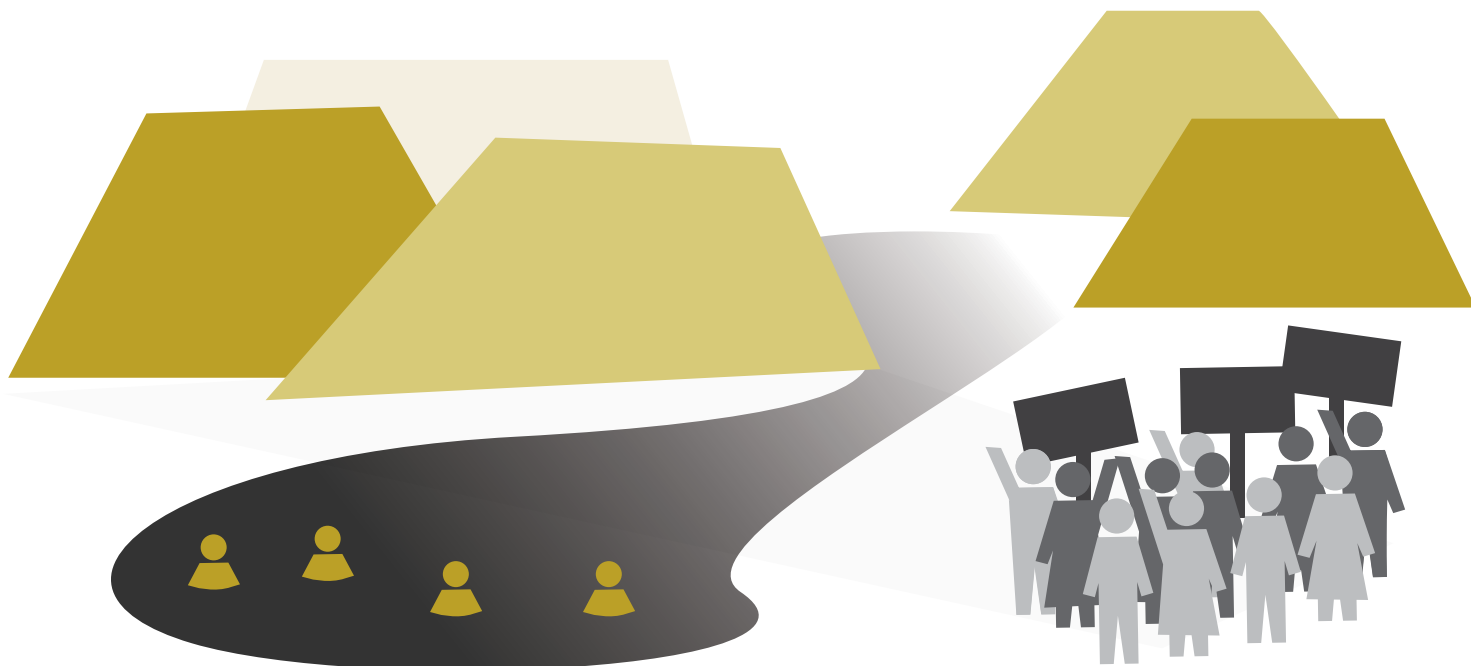


"Open cast coal mine in Mpumalanga", Credit: Mpumalanga Tourism & Parks Agency

**South Africa has a long legacy of environmental injustice. Apartheid-segregated residential areas were placed in close proximity to polluting industries and mines. Even after more than 20 years of democracy, race and class dominate environmental politics in South Africa. Black and poor communities remain the most affected and vulnerable to environmental injustice.**

A good example is Snake Park in Soweto, south of Johannesburg. Like many communities in the south of Johannesburg, Snake Park is surrounded by mine dumps and is located on the edge of a gold mine tailings dam (also known as 'yellow hills'). Early this year the Benchmarks Foundation (BMF) conducted a study focusing on the impacts of mining on people's health in the area.

What the study showed is that dust from the tailings has a high concentration of heavy



metals and is blown into the community, covering everything in people's homes, including clothes, blankets and even cooking pots. It also found that the sand in the area is radioactive and is being used in the construction of RDP houses.

BMF then measured the radiation levels in the general area and found that the levels were anywhere from 15-30 times what is considered safe for medium to long term habitation. Even the levels of radiation measured in and around the homes are much higher than what is considered safe for human exposure.

Even worse, when it rains the water on the mine dumps overflows into streams that then run into the community's street. There are no fences or signage to warn people of the hazards. Children play on the mine dumps and swim in the highly toxic pools of water.

Tragically, the study found a high number of children in the community who have cerebral palsy. There are so many children affected that there is a crèche that caters only for them. Cerebral palsy is a developmental disorder that BMF believes, in this area, is partly due to the heavy metals in the dust blowing off the hundreds of tailings dumps.

The government and the mining companies refuse to take responsibility and/or to provide support to the community. For their part, the mining companies have suggested that there is no link between the high rates of cerebral palsy amongst the children and the mine dumps/tailings dam.

Snake Park is but one example of hundreds of communities across South Africa that continue to pay a heavy economic and social price. For

over a hundred years now, the mining sector has inflicted environmental injustices across our country and, in many cases in the region as well. It is time to rein this sector in, along with those in government who protect the mines and benefit from the untold damage they have wreaked and which disproportionately affects poor, black communities.

The struggles of those at the frontline of pollution and environmental damage face a two-fold challenge. Firstly, environmental issues are linked closely to aspects of science and this means that if people want to challenge environmental degradation they often need an understanding of the basic science surrounding the problem.

This is difficult in a developing country like South Africa, where literacy and numeracy levels are quite low and where science has been used to leverage power and 'lock' people out of basic information about their worlds. Indeed, science has been used to sustain injustice and perpetuate inequalities of social, economic and political power.

Then there is also the separation of workers' issues from the broader community struggles for environmental justice. If we look at the mining sector for example, the type of jobs that mining offers pose a threat to workers' health and safety. When miners get ill, they may be retrenched or not adequately cared for, placing a burden on the state and adding to the economic burden of poor families and communities. Such struggles that face workers should be regarded as an environmental injustice; unions and communities need to be bringing their issues and struggles together.

**THERE ARE NO  
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One way that can help to combine struggles is by actively pursuing a concept known as 'citizen science' or 'street science'. Citizen science has been described as a way of 'democratising science' that can empower communities and workers to gain greater control over their lives, health, jobs and environment.

Most workers and communities do not see their activism and practical work as science. Rather, they most often have a view that science is something for experts in white coats working in expensive laboratories. But the many ways that people are responding to their challenges can and should be seen as citizen/street science. In this way, the struggles of ordinary people can be brought together more effectively.

Citizen/street science can and does shift the balance of power in favour of poor communities and workers. Working and struggling together, community groups, workers and unions can begin to build an environmental justice movement that can hold corporations and the state accountable. Environmental injustice should be everyone's concern!

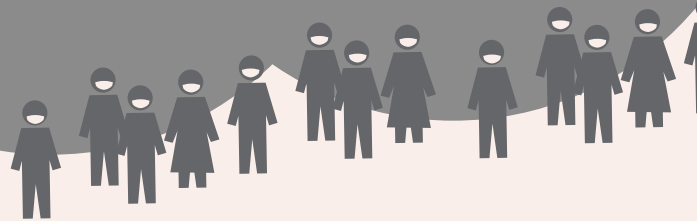
\*Ferrial Adam is long-time environmental activist and is presently doing a PhD on citizen science and environmental justice at the University of Johannesburg.

# SOUTH AFRICA'S

# POLLUTING GIANTS –

# IT'S ABOUT PROFITS

# AND CLASS



- **When it comes to greenhouse gas emissions, South Africa falls within the 15 biggest polluters in the world**
- **In 2015 alone, South Africa emitted 427 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO2)**
- **As such, South Africa as a country is a major contributor to global warming – although it is not quite in the league of China, the USA and India**
- **Air pollution in some parts of South Africa, such as the Mpumalanga Highveld, is so bad that millions of people suffer from diseases caused by air pollution, including skin rashes, heart disease, asthma and lung cancer**
- **In fact, it is estimated that between 2 200 and 2 700 people in South Africa die prematurely every year as a result of being exposed to high levels of air pollution**
- **But there is also a class dimension when it comes to pinning down which sections of society are responsible for air pollution – not all people contribute equally to air pollution**
- **When pollution is looked at in conjunction with class, it becomes very clear who the major polluters in South Africa are; and it is not the working class**

## THE POLLUTING CLASS

- The reality is that the ruling class (capitalists, politicians and top state bureaucrats) and their state and corporations are responsible for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions – including CO2 emissions – in South Africa
- The biggest 80 companies operating in South Africa account for over 60% of all air pollution
- Two of the biggest polluters amongst these companies are Eskom and Sasol
- Sasol's Secunda plant, which is a coal-to-fuel plant, is the largest single emitter of CO2 in the world
- Sasol as a group emits over 60 million metric tons of CO2 per year
- Eskom, however, is by far the biggest polluter in the country
- 90% of the electricity Eskom generates comes from coal and in particular low-grade coal that creates heavy pollution when burned
- Eskom emits well over 200 million metric tons of CO2 a year
- Over 77% of the electricity generated by Eskom through low-grade coal is used by mining, commerce, manufacturing and agricultural enterprises – with less than 20% being consumed by domestic/residential users
- But it is not just CO2 that is emitted by the likes of Sasol and Eskom – other poisonous gasses, including sulphur dioxide, hydrogen sulphide and mercury are pumped out by these companies



## EMPOWERMENT HAS A LONG DIRTY HISTORY

- Eskom has not only used low-grade polluting coal as its main source of electricity to benefit giant companies at the expense of the working class and its health; it also has a long history of promoting aspirant sections of the ruling class through 'empowerment' and their link to low-grade coal
- During apartheid, Eskom was used as a means of Afrikaner economic empowerment
- Most of the low-grade coal mines were owned by Afrikaner capitalists – English capital already had a monopoly over mines with better quality coal
- To assist these Afrikaner capitalists Eskom focused on building power stations that generated electricity through burning low-grade and heavily polluting coal
- It favoured purchasing this low quality coal from operations, such as Gencor, owned by Afrikaner capitalists
- Today and since 1994, Eskom now plays a key role in elite black economic empowerment
- Most black economic empowerment companies in the coal industry – like Afrikaner empowerment companies in the past – are concentrated around low-grade coal mines
- Eskom today supports these initiatives through purchasing low-grade coal from corporations with shares owned by a black elite, including Patrice Motsepe and Cyril Ramaphosa
- Thus the focus on low-grade coal by Eskom is also linked to a history of furthering the profits and class interests of an elite with political connections to the state
- As with apartheid, it is the working class that pays the consequences

## PROFITS AND POLLUTION

- Under capitalism and the market system major polluters like Eskom and Sasol externalise the costs of pollution by dumping it into the air
- Therefore, because they don't have to pay for the pollution they make, Eskom and Sasol's profits are subsidised and the costs of pollution – including bad health – are externalised onto people
- Having the ability to dump pollution and externalise any costs also means that companies like Sasol and Eskom don't have any incentive to use cleaner energy
- So it pays companies to pollute and pollution and profits are very directly connected

## POLLUTION AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ECONOMY

- The major defining features of South African capitalism, and what has made manufacturing and especially mining traditionally so profitable, are cheap labour and extremely cheap electricity
- Colonialism and apartheid were tied to capitalism and, through oppression and racism, a black working class

was created as a source of very cheap labour, and hence high profit, for capitalists (the tiny group of people that own the means of production) in South Africa

- But cheap electricity also played a huge role in ensuring the profitability of South African capitalism
- In fact, the state nationalised private electricity companies – such as the Victoria Falls Power Company – in 1948 in order to provide giant companies, including Anglo American, with the cheapest electricity in the world
- To do so Eskom has used low-grade coal, often supplied to it by the very companies receiving cheap and even subsidised electricity, such as Anglo American, because it was the cheapest way to produce electricity
- Thus capitalism in South Africa and the use of low-grade heavily polluting coal to generate the cheapest possible electricity have been and are tied together
- If air pollution is to be addressed in South Africa, therefore, the structure of the economy will also have to be changed, as it is the structure of capitalism in the country that drives the use of cheap low-grade coal – and hence massive air pollution – by companies like Sasol, Eskom and ArcelorMittal



# DEMOCRATIC ECO-SOCIALISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

BY VISHWAS SATGAR



## SOUTH AFRICA'S CARBON CAPITALISM

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world according to any measure and since apartheid. Ironically, this is a conclusion of the World Bank in its recent 2018 report. The Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) have made these observations since 2014. Their research has shown that the top 10% gets two thirds of South Africa's income. While, half of all South Africans are chronically poor, living in households with a per capita income of R1,149 or less per month. With South Africa's drought, our first major climate shock, these inequalities have been made worse through high food prices, for instance. In addition, new climate inequalities

**THE WORKING CLASS,  
UNEMPLOYED AND POOR  
HAVE BORNE THE BRUNT  
OF THE DROUGHT.**

have been created through the privatisation of water. The working class, unemployed and poor have borne the brunt of the drought. Alongside racialised and gendered super exploitation, high unemployment and increasing poverty, South Africa is a carbon intensive economy, based largely on coal. It is the 14th highest emitter of carbon emissions in the world, and despite energy inequality, has a per capita carbon footprint higher than China, India or

Brazil. Carbon capitalism was the bedrock of apartheid and was part of ANC hegemony, and then dominance, in the post apartheid period. With the climate crisis, South Africa is a carbon criminal state, contributing to the greenhouse effect and the extinction of the human species and other life forms. It is an 'eco-cidal' capitalism destroying the conditions that sustain life.

## LIMITS OF HISTORICAL SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVES: A MARXIST ECOLOGY CRITIQUE

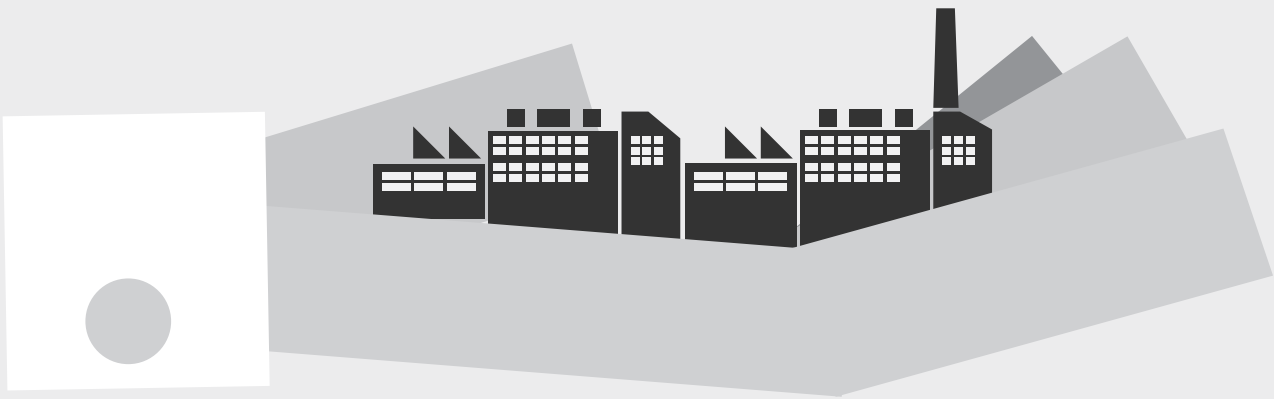
South Africa has had a diverse socialist imagination which has included Sovietised socialism (even Trotsky's minimum program), revolutionary nationalism and social democracy. The ANC-Alliance is shaped by all three versions of 20th century socialism. While these socialisms have not come to the fore in South Africa in the post-apartheid period, but lurk in the national liberation imagination, they have been theorised in a manner that grounds them in particular assumptions about nature and historical experience of these socialisms. From a Marxist Ecology perspective these socialisms have the following problems: (i) A blindness to the fact that Marx was an original systems thinker, who connected human social relations with nature. Marx understood the labour process mediated the relationship with nature. Further, the human-nature relationship underpinned a 'metabolic relationship' with nature as a whole.

This means the more capitalism undermined natural cycles and eco-systems the more the antagonism with nature deepened. (ii) An absence of thinking about value creation as grounded in both nature and labour. While labour was 'priced in', all these socialisms externalised the costs of nature in the production process. So pollution, climate change, species extinction, eco-system destruction, for example, are not taken into account in how production is organised. Nature must be conquered. (iii) These socialisms are all productivist. They copied capitalism's obsession with growth, which meant that accumulation and wealth creation were based on the assumption of endless resources. There were no ecological constraints. (iv) All these socialisms are obsessed with technology as progress. Technology is not neutral and is embedded in class relations. For corporations, science and research are about profit making. So unleashing the 'forces of production' will not necessarily meet the needs of society and, worse, will have destructive consequences for nature. Genetic engineering of seeds is a good example of this.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR A DEMOCRATIC ECO- SOCIALIST SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's historical socialist alternatives are limited and inappropriate for the struggle to address ecological crises and, particularly, the dangerous contradiction of climate crisis. Moreover, the dominant carbon capitalism is



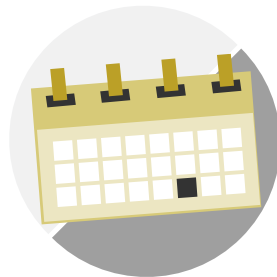
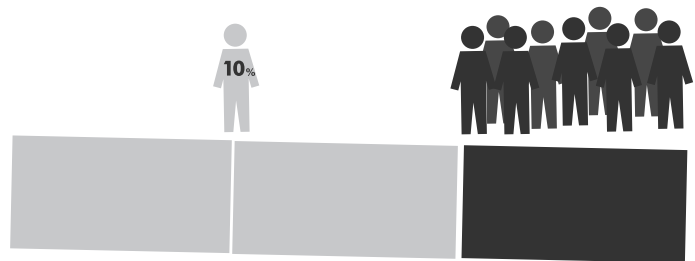


the real challenge. This capitalism produces class, racialised and gendered inequality but it also produces climate inequality and 'eco-cidal' destruction of human and non-human life forms. In this context democratic eco-socialism is central to the demand: 'System Change, Not Climate Change'. It recognises that 'democracy' (rights, freedoms, procedures and institutional forms) is about a people's history of struggle against capitalism and oppression; 'ecology', or the human relationship with nature, is essential for our survival and 'socialism' is necessary to ensure the end of exploitation, racism and gender oppression and ensure the rational organisation of society to meet human needs. In a rapidly heating world, with 12 years left to prevent catastrophic climate change and an overshoot of 1.5°C, democratic eco-socialism has two crucial tasks as part of the deep just transition. First, it has to build a transformative climate justice movement that builds a red-green alliance that can lead society. This means environmentalists have to become socialists and socialists have to become environmentalists to ensure fundamental transformation of capitalism. A new post carbon bloc of counter-hegemonic alliances led by the working class has to crystallise. This is already happening (See Open Letter

**... ENVIRONMENTALISTS HAVE TO BECOME SOCIALISTS AND SOCIALISTS HAVE TO BECOME ENVIRONMENTALISTS ...**

to President Cyril Ramaphosa [1]). Second, a programmatic approach to democratic systemic reform including decarbonisation; democratic planning; food, seed and water sovereignty; socially owned renewable energy; climate jobs; zero waste; mass clean energy public transport; solidarity economies; a substantive basic income grant has to be scaled up now. There are no stages in this struggle to secure human and non-human life.

**TOP 10% EARNERS GETS TWO THIRDS OF SA'S TOTAL INCOME**



**50% LIVES ON R1,149 OR LESS PER MONTH**



**14TH HIGHEST EMITTER OF CARBON EMISSIONS IN THE WORLD**



**TO PREVENT CATASTROPHIC CLIMATE CHANGE**

1. [https://www.safsc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Open-Letter\\_Emergency-sitting-of-Parliament-updated.pdf](https://www.safsc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Open-Letter_Emergency-sitting-of-Parliament-updated.pdf)



# WOMEN AND ECOLOGY: A MARXIST-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

BY JACKLYN COCK

Women are the shock absorbers of the current ecological crisis in South Africa. That crisis is rooted in the expansionist logic of capitalism. While resistance to environmental injustice is increasing, this is fragmented and there seems to be no comprehensive vision of an alternative to the current neo-liberal capitalist order. That crisis (evident in toxic pollution, water shortages, drought, warming oceans, deforestation, soaring temperatures and land degradation) is deepening. Scientists claim that southern Africa will be the worst affected from climate change, but the post-apartheid state is committed to economic growth and is expanding coal production, the main driver of climate change. Women's role in social reproduction means they deal most directly with the damaging effects of polluted air and water, crop failures and the more extreme weather events associated with climate change. This imposes an extra burden of unpaid work on women. In rural areas black working class women have to work harder to cultivate food crops on degraded land, and everywhere they have to stretch low wages and inadequate social grants further. It is women that have to care for the ill; illnesses caused by toxic pollution of air and water from the expansion of coal mining in South Africa.

Currently many poor, black communities living close to the operative coal-fired power stations and working or abandoned mines are dealing with forced removals, social dislocation and

dispossession, loss of livelihoods, threats to food security, limited access to clean water, health problems associated with air pollution, violation of ancestral graves and inadequate consultation.

However popular resistance to the ecological crisis generally in South Africa is weak. There is no mass-based environmental justice movement, only small, fragile initiatives. Women are the majority of people involved in resistance to the threats to their land and livelihoods from extractivism, for example, the women of Xolobeni against titanium mining, the women of Somekhele and Fulani against coal mining. Such resistance involves increasing repression, intimidation, and state violence against activists. The woman leader of resistance to titanium mining in Xolobeni, Nonhle Mathuba has received numerous death threats and the previous leader of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, Sikhosiphio Rhadebe was assassinated. Globally women environmental activists are subject to increasing violent repression with 200 killed in 2016 (The Guardian 13.7.2017).

Women's role in resistance is not rooted in any essentialist notion of their closeness to nature, but in the gendered division of labour which allocates the work of social reproduction to women. Many working class struggles in South Africa are moving beyond the point of production to the terrain of social reproduction. Much collective action framed as protests about service delivery or environmental justice are confronting

lack of access to the material conditions necessary for social reproduction, such as access to clean air, water, adequate housing, land for subsistence agriculture and so on. Black, working class women constitute the majority of participants in these protests and struggles.

At the same time it is largely women who are experimenting with alternatives outside the market such as practicing food sovereignty, which includes working with nature through agro-ecology, instead of the reliance on harmful pesticides and chemicals of industrial agriculture. It is largely women who are working for socially owned and democratically controlled renewable energy which works in harmony with nature, in addition to co-operative arrangements for childcare and seed-sharing to mention a few examples.

These could be building blocks to an eco-socialist order. So too could forging stronger connections between the powerful feminist struggles against gender-based violence and sexual harassment to the struggles against ecological violence. Both are part and parcel of the struggle against capitalism. The articulation of a radical, black feminism in South Africa represents a decisive break from the dismissal of feminism as contaminated, as an elitist, white middle class women's concern. But a feminism that speaks of racial and gender oppression without challenging capitalism and the class relations on which it is based, will fail.



"Women from the Amadiba Crisis Committee protest against Xolobeni mining, September 2015", Source: Groundup.org



# EARTHLIFE AFRICA: SOUTH AFRICA'S UNSUNG HERO OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE



"ELA 30 year celebration, Johannesburg, October 2018", Source: Earthlife Africa

**This October marked 30 years since Earthlife Africa (ELA), a South African environmental justice organisation was founded. It was formed in the late 80s – at the height of the state of emergency and oppressive apartheid system.**

It is a pity that many people do not know much about this organisation and the amazing work they have done over the past three decades. If it wasn't for Earthlife Africa, chances are that environmental pollution would be far worse.

According to the organisations founding documents, a small diverse group of people who met at a house in Johannesburg laid the foundation for an environmental pressure group that had a strong belief that ecology and politics are integrally linked. In 1992 at a conference organised by Earthlife Africa, environmental justice became a rallying call that framed environmental challenges as a 'brown' issue that must take cognisance of the socio-political issues facing people and the planet. Earthlife Africa (ELA) thus became an important organisation that bridged the divide between social justice and conservationism (that the majority of South Africans associated with environmental issues).

Since then ELA has punched way above its weight and taken on local, national and multinational giants responsible for high levels of pollution and destruction that directly and indirectly affects poor black communities living on the fence-line of this pollution. This includes illegal hazardous waste dumps on the East Rand, incineration of waste, lead free

petrol, mining in St Lucia, impacts of mining on Johannesburg water, acid mine drainage to name but a few.

The key strength for Earthlife was collaborating with the growing number of Environmental Justice organisations that were mushrooming all over the country, like the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance. This has contributed to numerous success stories that have changed the face of environmentalism and these need to be mentioned.

Earthlife Africa challenged mercury poisoning and pollution! It was ELA, together with the Environmental Justice Networking Forum, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union and the Legal Resources Centre that exposed the pollution by Thor Chemicals. The campaign highlighted the workers and communities directly affected by the mercury poisoning and pollution in Cato Ridge outside Pietermaritzburg. The organisations worked closely with workers, unions, local farmers and organisations and in 1997 Thor in Britain settled out of court, paying the victims R9.4 million in damages, setting an important precedent for compensation claims against British-based multinationals by workers in other countries.

Earthlife Africa has tirelessly campaigned against nuclear energy. The Pebble Bed Modular reactor wasted R9 billion of tax payers money. More recently ELA, joined hands with the Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute (SAFCEI) in taking legal action against the government's proposed nuclear deal. SAFCEI and ELA filed court papers against the Department of Energy, National Parliament, NERSA and President Zuma, challenging various aspects of

the nuclear procurement process. This challenge was important because it also highlighted the corruption and dodgy deals between a Zuma led government and the Russian government.

ELA established the Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Project to address the most urgent environmental issue of our time, climate change. It was ELA that exposed Eskom's Special Purchasing Agreements with major users of electricity, which effectively subsidise large multinational corporations, like BHP Billiton and Anglo-American.

More recently, Earthlife works with the Life After Coal campaign which comprises key organisations such as Groundwork and the Centre for Environmental Rights. They have together been a force and a thorn in the sides of both Sasol and Eskom. In 2017, ELA won South Africa's first climate change case and forced the government to reassess the impact of a coal power plant. ELA argued in its case against the environmental affairs department that government had not carried out a proper climate change impact assessment before confirming the construction of a coal-fired power station.

Different tactics and strategies have been used to fight environmental injustices, including challenging the type of information and knowledge and how it is shared with people and communities. Challenging how knowledge is created, disseminated and used is also about challenging issues of power. It is through its inclusive campaigning, scientific research, community mobilising, and media that this organisation has been able to face up to the polluting giants in our country. For that, they must be thanked and applauded as there are few who have the courage to fight for so long and hard.

While Earthlife has been able to weather the storm of changing enemies, new social and environmental challenges, changing leadership - for 30 years – their work is still cut out for them. There is clear evidence that poor, vulnerable and predominantly black communities are still marginalised and still bear the brunt of pollution and environmental degradation in South Africa. It is hoped that environmental justice organisations like Earthlife Africa go back to building the environmental justice movement that is so needed in our country. A movement that includes the many different organisations and people that are fighting for social and environmental justice. It is only then that ELA and other similar organisations will be able to go another 30 years of speaking truth to power, and more importantly creating the change we want to see.

# A UNION FOR ANGELS

(IN LOVING MEMORY OF COMRADE PETRUS MASHISHI)

BY STEPHEN FAULKNER

He was larger than life  
Starting as a municipal plumbers  
assistant  
As grudgingly allowed  
By apartheid's hideous demarcations  
Did all the work  
While supervised by one  
Who couldn't do anything  
Without him

He held no malice  
Said he actually  
Felt sorry for them  
For deep down inside  
They knew they were lost  
And their time was coming to a close

Soaked up the unfolding situation  
Like a sponge  
Understood early  
Workers had the power  
If they organized  
If they were clear  
If they were encouraged  
Given confidence  
Class confidence

Laughed often  
Especially at the stupidity  
Of the system  
It was murderous  
But he simply refused to be  
intimidated

Became an organiser  
Helped build a formidable union  
Was elected a leader  
Dedicated his life

Never stole a cent  
Never ignored a mandate  
Always reported back  
Built a team  
Spoke truth to power  
Often

Made mistakes certainly  
But learnt from them  
Was not afraid to apologise

Reminded his own comrades  
What the struggle was about  
Refused to let them forget  
Some were grateful  
Others resentful

Didn't go to Parliament  
Happy where I am he said  
With the workers  
Woe betide those who sell us out  
Whoever they might be

Happiest?  
Seeing workers educated  
And being at home with loved ones

Experienced tragedy  
A son lost to a motor accident  
Much more besides  
Held Ma Judith, Koto and Tshepo  
close  
Stayed philosophical  
Practical  
Ready to share his woes  
But only if asked

Never touched alcohol  
Or tea or coffee  
I learnt to bring hot water or juice  
First one there in a morning  
Ploughing through the papers  
Then documents  
Then a list of jobs for the day  
Like an artisan  
Fixing a leaky movement.

Could laugh like a drain  
Liked being teased  
Adored Chinese food  
And took us for lunch  
The proprietor  
Knew his favourite dishes

I sometimes wonder  
Did we deserve him?

Those who fed on factionalism  
Stood around in their own luke warm  
piss  
Like a pipe-fitters nightmare

Waited for their opportunity

It came at the Bela Bela Congress  
He never lobbied  
Some urged him to stand again for  
election  
Then left him stranded and exposed  
While empty headed nondescripts  
Dreamed of new cars

I wept  
I wasn't alone  
But we were noted

Regarded as disloyal thereafter  
By those so-called modernists  
Whose avarice was as old as time

They took their cue  
Not from principles  
But from the new millionaires  
Inside and outside of government  
Their grubby hands eager  
To maul workers money  
And maul those who tried to stop  
them

It did not take them long to pillage  
and loot  
To unravel the safeguards  
And lie through their teeth  
And those with vested interests let  
them  
And we let them  
Our loyalty to the Union exploited  
By those loyal only to themselves  
And a once mighty union now clings  
To a coat hanger

They turned their backs on him  
And all he stood for  
But they will no doubt try  
To claim him as theirs  
The schemers, the thieves, the  
misleaders  
But they will fail  
And miserably so

The unavoidable stark contrast  
Between their actions  
And his work  
Will haunt them into perpetual shame

Well be ashamed!  
You lightweight imposters  
You who dare not face your own  
members!  
Your time will come  
As certain as day follows night

In retirement he worked just as hard

Towards the end  
His beloved wife took away his phone  
The only way to make him rest  
And now he rests forever

On my first day he said  
Let's take a walk through the City  
But we could not go more than

20 metres at a time  
Before someone called him with an  
Amandla!  
Or stopped to update on a grievance  
Or asked about the wage claim  
Or what he thought about the latest  
crisis  
Or just for the joy of vigorously  
shaking his hand  
In anticipation of his laughter  
Rumbling and rolling up from deep  
inside

Informal traders knew him by name  
Bon jour Monsieur Petrus ca va?  
Oui bien merci! He replied  
Laughing and waving at the same  
time  
He organized them too!

I laughed again  
When three buses  
Stopped side by side  
In formation  
Blocking the main road  
To let us amble across  
Each driver calling out in turn  
Howzit Prez!  
What's happening Mashish?  
Need a ride Com?

When I asked  
Is it always like this?  
He replied  
Out here  
Each one teaches one  
Then he noted a paving stone  
That I had tripped over  
Must get that fixed he said  
Two days later  
It was

There will be no shrines for Petrus  
No posthumous awards  
He refused his name on a Union  
building  
But he will never ever be forgotten


On the day he died  
His sister said  
He will be organizing in heaven now


Imagine  
A union for angels  
Lead by a humble plumber.


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