



VACCINE NATIONALISM AND PROFITEERING: HOW CAPITALISM HAS CAPTURED A PANDEMIC

by Dale T. McKinley

Over the last two-and-a-half years, those of us living on the southern tip of the African continent have had front-row seats to the often absurd and mostly sordid theatre played out at the Zondo 'State Capture' Commission. We have watched and listened to story after story of corruption, mismanagement, dishonesty, greed and self-centredness, of how a small minority of the politically connected and powerful systematically went about capturing the South African state.



A patient receives a COVID-19 test at the Ndlovu clinic in Elandsdoorn. Photograph: AP Photo/Jerome Delay

As if to rub salt into the gaping wounds inflicted by this sorry saga, along came the COVID-19 pandemic just over a year ago. Despite a few initially positive moves by some states to confront it, both in South Africa and in other countries around the world, it was not long before the same combination of systemic, state capture 'behaviour' once again rose to the surface. Nowhere has this been more acutely applied and felt than in relation to the development, procurement and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

Right from the start it became clear that the agreements and plans for the development of vaccines, which mostly all emanated from wealthy, developed countries, as well as Russia and China, were going to be moulded by a dominant nationalist logic (i.e., 'we will take care of ourselves first'), would privilege a capitalist, profit generating and market-based approach, and be shrouded in secrecy. Using billions in public funds, governments poured money into various research and development projects run mostly by private and corporate pharmaceutical outfits. Even before it was known which vaccines would or would not be effective or what the final costs would be, bilateral deals were cut for billions of doses.

At the same time, the World Health Organisation (WHO) initiated a global public-private vaccine collaboration, the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), which is designed to ensure equitable access to vaccines across the globe. The whole idea is that through funding cross-subsidisation from richer nations and a collectively planned equitable distribution, all 190 nations enrolled will obtain sufficient and affordable vaccines.

However, instead of prioritising such a collective and redistributive approach to vaccines through COVAX (even with its potential weaknesses and problems), a senseless nationalistic rush for vaccines has taken over. The last several months has seen almost 13 billion doses of various vaccines being bought, mostly through bilateral deals between specific nations and private pharmaceutical corporates, with a few between states. This is more than enough to vaccinate every single adult person in the world.

The nationalist greed is astounding, with countries like Canada having bought 5 times more

vaccines than needed and others like the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand and the European Union purchasing more than twice what they need. The result: only 16% of the global population currently hold 60% of the vaccines.

Meanwhile, in order to fill the gap left by wholly inadequate COVAX supplies, almost all low-and middle-income countries have been forced to try and make deals directly with pharmaceutical corporates or in the case of Russia and China, with their state-owned outfits. So far, poorer countries which make up 84% of the global population have only been able to secure around 32% of the world's vaccine supply.

Because the necessary funding for COVAX from the richer nations has not been forthcoming, poorer nations are now being further forced to turn to the World Bank, private banks and capitalist markets to source funds; funds that they will be responsible for paying back in one form or another. As Solomon Dersso, Chairperson of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights has rightfully concluded, this is all the result of "a market-based approach to the production of and access to the vaccine, from which the pharmaceutical industry and those dominating the existing global economic system benefit the most ..."

But it gets worse. Through the 'Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights' (TRIPS), the World Trade Organization (WTO) maintains control over various Intellectual Property (IP) rights, such as patents, industrial designs, copyright and protection of undisclosed information. All of these IP rights impact negatively on the availability, accessibility and affordability of COVID-19 vaccines. As such, India and South Africa (backed by 99 other countries, most all in the Global South) have recently proposed that the WTO temporarily waive parts of TRIPs that cover IP rights related to COVID-19 vaccines, so that there can be 'timely access to affordable medical products including vaccines and medicines ... essential to combat COVID-19'.

And what has been the response of the richer nations? To vigorously oppose it, claiming this would stifle innovation, compromise security and disincentivise research and development at pharmaceutical companies. While there will be more upcoming discussions at the WTO, it is

doubtful if things will change. Unlike Dr Jonas Salk (the developer of the polio vaccine) who, when asked who owned the patent replied, 'the people', those small minority of political and economic elites from richer nations have clearly decided that the interests and profits of private corporates and/or state entities are more important than the health and indeed lives of billions of poorer citizens of the world.

Sure enough, capitalist pharmaceuticals like Moderna and Pfizer are set to make incredible amounts of money. Moderna is projected to earn around US\$10 billion (R145 billion) from its vaccine during 2021 while Pfizer is expected to rake in an astounding US\$19 billion (R275 billion) by the end of the year. All told, it is estimated that global COVID-19 vaccine sales could top US\$100 billion (R1,5 trillion), of which close to 50% will be profit for a handful of capitalist and state companies. Compare those numbers to the WHO's estimation that an investment of US\$38 billion (R550 billion) would suffice to fully fund global vaccine access and, would be paid back 'in less than 36 hours once global mobility and trade alone are restored.'

Because of the IP rights, national security veils and the general secrecy surrounding the costing and pricing structures of COVID-19 vaccines, it is virtually impossible for ordinary people who, through taxes and other means have funded and continue to fund the lion's share of vaccine research, purchase and distribution, to hold anyone to account. Like the Wall Street hedge fund managers prior to the 2008 crash, the private and state vaccine pharmaceuticals (along with their political protectors and shareholders) are in the process of gorging themselves at the capitalists-only feast that has been prepared for them. As usual, the gorgers will never pay for the bill. Meanwhile, the vast majority of humanity will be left to scramble for whatever small crumbs remain.

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Infographic by ILRIG

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Thina by Soundz of the South

EDITORIAL

This issue of Workers World News, the first of 2021, is concerned with ongoing and rising inequality (in its many forms) in South Africa and globally, as we find ourselves a year into the COVID-19 pandemic.

The nationalistic rollout of COVID-19 vaccines reveals this inequality on a global scale. In this issue's Lead Article, Dale T. McKinley exposes the greed, capture and privatisation surrounding COVID-19 vaccines that is happening at the expense of the world's most vulnerable people, at a time where free and accessible vaccines are key to overcoming a global health crisis. The poster included in this issue is an ILRIG infographic which complements this article, and which provides information around why we need COVID-19 vaccines, debunks the myths surrounding them, and argues that we must urgently struggle for public and equitable vaccine development and distribution.

In Gender News, Alex Hotz analyses the budget crisis faced by the CCMA and its anti-worker response to this, which has intensely isolated and disempowered workers in the context of a pandemic and economic recession. She argues that due to the unequal opportunities, conditions and pay women workers already experience, and the extra burden of care they take on both in the home and workplace, women workers are hit hardest by the state's assault on the working class.

Natasha Vally and Shaeera Kalla from the C19 People's Coalition also provide a gendered lens in the Guest Article, as they reflect on the importance of continuing and ultimately expanding necessary social grants as a starting point for tackling the systemic and structural crisis facing the poor and working class in South Africa.

Continuing on the topic of worker struggles and building power in the context of severe economic and income inequality, this issue contains the first in new Educational Series written by Leila Khan on worker cooperatives. This first article in the series introduces worker cooperatives and contemplates to what extent they can create spaces for democratic, anti-capitalist principles and practices within a capitalist economy.

In International News, Shawn Hattingh turns to the powerful protests and strike actions taken by Indian peasants and farmworkers reacting to the fascist Indian government's Farm Acts, and discusses the significance of this moment for the future of working class and left struggles in India.

Closer to home, Mabelandile Twani from the July Movement writes in My Struggle about land occupations in Khayelitsha, and puts forward the argument that these are important protest actions which show communities taking back power in an historical context of land dispossession, and should be supported as such.

Finally, our Cultural Page contains a poem written by South African hip hop collective Soundz of the South, which does the important work – as sometimes only art is able to do – of emoting and personalising the impacts of the inequalities and oppression experienced under capitalism.

GENDER NEWS by Alex Hotz

THE CCMA BUDGET CUTS ARE AN ATTACK ON WORKERS – AND WOMEN WORKERS ARE HARDEST HIT

The National Lockdown imposed by the South African government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has seen almost 2 million South Africans losing their jobs, and many workers being forced into even harsher exploitative working conditions and unfair labour practices.

Compounded with the socio-economic devastation deepened by the pandemic, the government has determined that the priority for South Africa is economic recovery, which will take the form of greater austerity and cuts in spending. One implication has been that the state has cut its funding of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) by R600 million over 3 years. These cuts will, and have already had, a devastating impact on workers and their ability to defend their rights against exploitative employers with deep pockets.

How have the CCMA budget cuts already begun to affect workers?

As a response to the budget cuts, the CCMA has closed the walk-in referrals that workers have relied on for years. These referrals made up more than 60% of disputes that are referred to the CCMA. The CCMA has stated that workers must now use their online system to log disputes, but how many workers will be able to do this without smartphones, data, or assistance to complete the forms? The CCMA has also suspended the use of part-time commissioners until March 2021. This is despite the fact that the majority of CCMA commissioners are part-time and hear up to 80% of all CCMA arbitration. Without them, the CCMA will be unable to function. There is a backlog of cases as it is taking longer for matters to be heard, conciliations are not happening, and the online system is not working. In some cases, commissioners are encouraging workers to settle disputes for outrageously low amounts like R200.00. In addition, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Employment and Labour recently agreed in principle for the CCMA to begin to charge fees for its services, including for disputes on the National Minimum Wage. This will make the CCMA, currently the only body that is free for workers, even more inaccessible and will leave workers more unprotected and vulnerable.

The impact on women workers

The impact of these budget cuts will be felt most by non-unionised, casualised, and precarious workers – many of whom are women. The International Labour Organisation's (ILO)'s report on COVID-19 and the World of Work illustrates this where it states, "In contrast to previous crises, women's employment is at greater risk than men's, particularly owing to the impact of the downturn on the service sector. At the same time, women account for a large proportion of workers in front-line occupations, especially in the health and social care sectors. Moreover, the increased burden of unpaid care brought by the crisis affects women more than men." The current political situation is both laying bare and worsening existing inequalities. To assess it without making women's position central will not adequately equip us to respond to either the profound challenges or the seeds of positive change facing us.

It is poor Black women workers in South Africa that are facing the brunt of the pandemic and economic

recession. Women workers are in some of the most vulnerable sectors as domestic workers, health workers, care workers, and farmworkers. They make up a large majority of the informal economy. Women workers have raised many challenges around the fact that they are not treated the same as men workers. Women who are domestic workers experience the lowest pay, with their minimum wage being the lowest wage across sectors. On top of this, women usually carry the burden of care work in their workplace and homes. It is women who faced the biggest loss of work during the lockdown and have not had the recourse to challenge their dismissal, loss of income, etc. given the CCMA budget cuts. Women workers have carried the cost of short-time and lay-offs as many were forced to stay at home.

In the case of farmworkers, women have been more precarious, with the informal conditions of their work making it easier for the bosses to retrench them. Those with fixed-term contracts (mostly men) could apply for benefits from the UIF, take special leave, or as a last resort, take their paid annual leave during the lockdown. None of these options are available for women farmworkers working on a casual basis. Often, these women are not unionised and must accept their plight without too much push back. They are afraid of being evicted and not allowed back, even as casual workers, because women working on farms have no security of tenure. The COVID-19 pandemic has entrenched this insecurity even further.

Reimagining labour struggles

Workers have to unite to prevent the CCMA from further moving in a direction that is anti-worker and to challenge the deepening attack on workers' rights and the ability to organise. The attack by the ruling class on workers is going to intensify as the economic situation worsens – it is therefore imperative that the working class, the labour movement and progressive forces need to reimagine what an institution that puts the dignity of workers, and economic and social justice at the forefront of its work looks like. It is convenient for bosses and the state that workers are divided – between those who are unionised and not unionised, between those in the 'formal' and those in the 'informal' economy, and between those who are permanent and those who are casualised, seasonal or temporary. We cannot let the CCMA become an institution of the bosses. We must transform the CCMA into a structure that defends the rights of workers and that values justice and respect for workers.

We must unite organisations, movements and unions that are championing the struggle of workers. Organisations and unions cannot behave in the same way as the CCMA and the bosses do. Trade union federations and trade unions themselves must question their co-option into spaces like the CCMA governing body, NEDLAC, which do not serve the interests of workers. How can unions sit silently when the slashing of the CCMA budget is an assault on their members? Something must be done not only to transform the CCMA but about the deepening crisis of the labour movement, which cannot at present reimagine how to organise workers and build movements in a way that responds to the changing nature of work and struggle in this country. We must demand that institutions protecting labour rights be inclusive of ALL workers. These institutions must take seriously the challenges that women workers face and prioritise their demands, including the fact that there should not be a gendered division of salaries and wages.



Protest outside CCMA Place in Benoni on 24 February 2021. Photograph: CWAO

HOW CAPITALISM HAS CAPTURED A PANDEMIC continued.

The more immediate and longer-term practical consequences of vaccine nationalism and profiteering for that majority can be sourced to the cold, perverted and ultimately inhumane logic of contemporary capitalism. That logic - which is not specific to the West - only pays attention to the livelihoods and lives of the workers and poor (and increasingly also, to the shrinking middle class) to the extent that they serve the profit motive and keep the political and economic elites various holds over national and global power, intact.

When applied to the global COVID-19 pandemic one of the main practical impacts will continue to be unequal access to vaccines. In turn, this will mean a greater suffering and loss of life in under-vaccinated

countries, greatly reduced global population immunity, and an intensification of associated and ongoing social and economic problems; all of which of course, will hit the poor and vulnerable the hardest.

If South Africa has learnt one lesson from its national state capture journey over these past years, it must surely be that in order to have any real chance of stopping the capture, the country's deep, structural and systemic social and economic crises have to be consciously recognised and then collectively confronted and addressed. The same applies, at both a national and global level, to the capturing of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let the recapturing struggle take flight.

EDUCATIONAL SERIES: PART 1 | by Leila Khan

ARE WORKER COOPERATIVES AN ANTI-CAPITALIST TOOL?

In this educational series, we are going to consider worker cooperatives and their potential as a form of resistance to capitalism, and as experiments in democratic and anti-hierarchical organising.

A cooperative is a form of commercial enterprise that is collectively owned, controlled and operated by its members. The aim of cooperatives is to address the needs of their members. In the case of worker cooperatives (one type of cooperative) the workers themselves are the collective owners who democratically decide how the business will be run and how their surplus¹ will be allocated and shared. This model is very different from that of traditional companies that exist to maximise profits for an individual or small group of people who have exclusive ownership and control, and which operate in terms of a strict hierarchy.

While capitalism is based on private ownership of the means of production² and the exploitation of workers to extract profit, worker cooperatives which diffuse hierarchical power, collectivise ownership of capital, and function in the interests of working-class people seem to attack and disrupt the capitalist order of things. The roles that worker cooperatives have played and continue to play in supporting strikes, providing resources to poor communities, and as part of social movements also suggest an anti-capitalist potential.

Their seemingly anti-capitalist nature pushes us to ask whether worker cooperatives are a viable tool to resist and dismantle capitalism, and to what extent they can guide us to a socialist society.

Socialism in practice?

Following the basic definition of socialism as a system in which the means of production are owned and controlled by the working class, many consider worker cooperatives to be 'islands' of socialism within capitalism.

It is true that there are many ways in which worker cooperatives can embody anti-capitalist or socialist principles and practices. This is because many worker cooperatives are formed by workers looking to build solutions in response to the conditions and negative impacts of capitalism. The first modern worker cooperatives were formed by workers during the Industrial Revolution to sustain their communities through providing more affordable goods and services, and in the early US labour movement to support striking workers.

By prioritising the needs of their worker-owners/members and their communities, worker cooperatives can limit the exploitation and excesses of capitalism. Worker cooperatives build worker power and allow workers to self-manage in a democratic way, as decisions are discussed and agreed upon instead of demanded by bosses. This reduces the alienation of workers from their labour power and subverts the usual top-down and undemocratic way of organising production under capitalism. Many worker cooperatives (and cooperatives in general) also adopt guiding values such as equality, accountability, solidarity, and community care, and aim to have ethical impacts in society more broadly.

Even though worker cooperatives can and do challenge the exploitative logic of capitalism, it is important to remember that these individual 'socialist' experiments are not enough to displace



Madison Worker Cooperative in Wisconsin, USA. Photograph: Albert Herring.

or even disrupt the capitalist system. We know that socialism in one country, and especially one workplace, is not possible given the pervasive and global nature of capitalism. Karl Marx identified this critique at the First International in 1864, stating that "however excellent in principles and however useful in practice, cooperative labour, if kept within the narrow circle of the casual efforts of private workmen, will never be able to arrest the growth in geometrical progression of monopoly, to free the masses, nor even to perceptibly lighten the burden of their miseries." This means that unless worker cooperatives are able to develop into a dominant force in the economy, they will not successfully support their members or transform society.

The limits of these experiments

The ability of worker cooperatives to operate on a large scale and dominate the global economy is largely constrained by the pressures of competition under capitalism. Many worker cooperatives simply do not have the same access to capital and technology as large companies, and cannot provide goods and services at lower prices than businesses who underpay their workers. For worker cooperatives to be financially successful and sustainable, they require extensive institutional support, including from the state – and a movement of worker-owned enterprises which seeks to dominate and displace private capital is likely to be met with repression rather than support from the capitalist state. Workers who occupy and seize land and factories for the purposes of running cooperatives are also met with the same problem, and are forced to spend most of their energies defending themselves against attacks from the ruling class.

On the other hand, worker cooperatives who receive some state support are vulnerable to co-optation, particularly by states in liberal democracies who wish to align with more socially and environmentally conscious businesses in order to rehabilitate capitalism's image. This is

in part because a worker cooperative is not an inherently socialist or anti-capitalist formation. Many worker cooperatives abandon their initially-held anti-capitalist values such as cooperation and community solidarity if these limit their competitive potential. They adopt capitalist practices, including bad working conditions and outsourcing of labour, in order to survive and compete under capitalism. As worker cooperatives attempt to persist as a business in such a competitive environment, they often turn inwards and isolate themselves from broader social movements.

It is important to develop a critical understanding of the tools available to the left, such as worker cooperatives, so that we are fully aware of their potential to challenge power and can attempt to avoid the ways they are susceptible to defeat or appropriation.

The radical potential of worker cooperatives

While worker cooperatives are not a replacement for revolution and cannot sufficiently threaten the capitalist system on their own, they can play a radical prefigurative role. Prefigurative politics is when movements practice the principles that they want to be reflected in the world they are fighting for. Worker cooperatives practice this kind of politics very effectively when they have a coherent political strategy and are committed to values and principles which aim to transform society. Worker cooperatives which take their strategy and principles seriously in this way, though they might not be able to change the system at large, are important spaces for building political consciousness and mobilising people towards struggle. It is also critical that worker cooperatives are not isolated but are connected to and active in labour and community movements, so that working class unity is built, and co-optation is resisted. Unions and other social organisations can provide political education or help lobby support for worker cooperatives, which in turn can provide venues for meetings and can take part in actions.

Many worker cooperatives already choose to allocate some of their surplus to movements they belong to or are in solidarity with.

Ensuring that worker cooperatives are able to function in this way is critical even now, because if collective worker and community control will be a central factor under socialism, then we need to practice how to self-manage, to organise and live in a principled, collective and anti-hierarchical manner, and unlearn the individualist, competitive habits of capitalism.

Beyond this, worker cooperatives are important because when successful, they allow working people to better their lives. Worker-owners have improved income, and many choose to spend this surplus within their community, meaning that money does not leave the community as is usually the case with traditional corporations, particularly in poorer neighbourhoods. Worker cooperatives also empower their members who take on more responsibility in their place of work as owners, and therefore gain more skills. By improving working and living conditions, worker cooperatives can contribute to sustainable organising as people have more time and energy to be involved in struggle.

Finally, worker cooperatives play a crucial role of showing that it is possible for production to be organised more humanely, and resources to be allocated differently, giving insight into what a post-capitalist world might look like, and calling the current system into question. They show that people are able to self-direct and do not require rigid hierarchies or brutal consequences to be productive or take responsibility for their actions.

For the above reasons, and despite their limitations, worker cooperatives should not be abandoned but increasingly supported where possible, particularly in the context of capitalist exploitation and inequality worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the following articles in this series, we will explore examples of worker cooperatives historically and globally, and interrogate their successes and failures, as well as engage the space and challenges for worker cooperatives in the South African context.

1. Cooperatives refer to the value/income they create as 'surplus'. This is different from profit, which is when the surplus value created by workers' labour is stolen by the capitalists.

2. The land, machinery and other inputs (i.e. capital) used to produce goods and services. Those who own the means of production in society are the capitalists.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS by Shawn Hattingh

INDIAN FARMERS' PROTESTS: A BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE

A battle is playing itself out in India that may prove to be one of the most important in the history of that country. This battle centres around a drive by the Indian state to completely restructure the agricultural sector in favour of corporations and put an end to the peasantry.

The villains in this battle are the fascist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the state bureaucracy and Modi's closest capitalist backers in the form of Mukesh Ambani, Ratan Tata and Gautam Adani. The heroes are the hundreds of millions of peasants and farmworkers that are undertaking the biggest protest movement in history to stop the total corporatisation of the agricultural sector – indeed, they are fighting for a way of life that the ruling class and state are seeking to end in the name of profit.

The latest round in this epic battle began in September 2020 when the Indian government announced it was passing three new laws that would lead to fundamental changes in the agricultural sector. To understand the changes proposed, it is important to understand how the agricultural sector in India has evolved since 1947 – the date of India's independence from direct British rule.

The history of India's agricultural sector

About 800 million people in India make a living in agriculture with most being peasants, who on average each own just over 1 hectare of land. As an outcome of the national liberation

struggle in the early to mid-1900s, a state-run food distribution system was established that guaranteed peasant farmers a minimum price for their commodities and ensured that the general public could buy food at relatively low prices. As such, the Indian state would buy produce from peasants at public markets, store the produce to ensure food stability, and sell produce to the population at subsidised prices.

In the 1990s, however, this model came under attack when the Indian state adopted neoliberal policies and encouraged corporations to increasingly enter the food distribution and retail sector – and begin to purchase produce directly from peasants. Nonetheless, at that stage the state-run food system was maintained to a degree (although it was downscaled) and most peasants today still sell their produce to the state as it offers higher prices than corporations. If the state-run food system had completely ended in the 1990s, poverty, already widespread with the average peasant household income at only US \$85 (R1232) a month, would have been even worse.

The new war

The new laws passed in September 2020 now seek to completely end the existence of the state-run food system, to completely end the state as a buyer of produce, and to give corporations the exclusive right to buy produce directly from peasants. Through this, food corporations – some owned by Modi's allies Ambani, Tata and Adani – will be handed the right to set prices for purchasing products from

peasants through the power they have. As part of the new laws, if there is a dispute between an individual peasant and a corporation buying their produce, the peasant will no longer have the right to take legal action against the corporation. This in effect gives corporations free reign to break contracts and underpay if they wish. Along with this, multinational corporations will be given

greater rights to buy up large parts of agricultural land and also contract farmers to grow crops on their behalf. In reality, these laws aim to end the existence of peasant

farmers by driving them out of business through corporations setting prices (which will be exceptionally low), and to actively assist corporations to take over the agricultural sector. Linked to this, the retirement age of farmworkers would be raised from 66 to 68. Hundreds of millions of people, therefore, stand to lose their livelihoods.

The counter-attack

As a result of this attack, millions of peasants and farmworkers have been out on strike since October 2020 demanding that the three new laws be repealed. They have also occupied the highways around New Delhi and have erected tent cities as part of the protests. The aim of this is to stop the movement of goods and thereby put pressure on the state. In fact, the protestors have vowed that they will continue to occupy highways and hold demonstrations until the agricultural laws are reversed, even if it takes more than a year of protest.

It has not just been farmworkers and peasants that have, however, been under attack from the

Modi regime. The state also amended the general labour laws in September 2020, giving employers the right to unilaterally increase working hours, freely fire workers along with making it harder to strike and limiting the right of unions to organise. For this reason, the working class as a whole has been sympathetic to the struggle of farmworkers and peasants. In fact, on 26 November 2020 workers in all sectors went on a general strike against the amended labour laws and the new agricultural laws, joining the protests of the farmworkers and peasants. As a result, 250 million people protested around India.

The state responds

The state has used various means to try and end the protests. Early on, the state used brutal force against the protestors, and a number of peasants and farmworkers were killed. The state since then, however, has changed tactics. In early 2021 it said it would suspend the new laws' implementation for 18 months. The protest movement has not bought this false attempt at appeasement and they have continued to mobilise.

What's at stake

It is unclear what the outcome of this battle will be. Either way, it will be historically significant. If Modi, the ruling class and their state win, it will mean the end of the peasantry in India, it will embolden the Modi regime and it will signify the beginning of even darker times to come for workers and the poor. If the farmworkers and peasants win, they will be in a better position to defend their livelihoods and they would have defeated the fascist state in this fight – possibly leading to a new dawn for progressive struggles in India.

...protestors have vowed that they will continue to occupy highways and hold demonstrations until the agricultural laws are reversed, even if it takes more than a year of protest.

It is clear that these capitalist structures are not representing the working class in Khayelitsha.

MY STRUGGLE by Mabhelandile Twani (July Movement)

PEOPLE'S POWER AND LAND TAKEN BY COMMUNITIES

The black working class in South Africa has been facing a big housing challenge, and many people have been applying for RDP houses. Since the 1980s, people have been on waiting lists, and the Department of Housing has failed to address the housing question, giving many false reasons for not building houses for the black working class.

Our South African government has adopted neoliberal economic policies against the poor, black majority. These policies tell government to cut social spending. This means that housing that should be built for poor people is not allowed. The black working class must find their own ways of building their own houses. These policies say that government must play a smaller role in providing for the poor. Government must instead build blocks of flats, which working class people must rent to buy.

In 2011, Minister Lindiwe Sisulu said government will end the RDP process of building houses. This is backed by neoliberal policies which say that people must buy houses and not rely on RDP houses. She went further to say that people who are less than 40 years old, and have been in the Department's database for less than 10 years, are not going to be housing beneficiaries. Sisulu has made it clear that

very few people will get houses in South Africa.

This is the narrative, and common sense, which explains why working-class occupations of open land spaces happen in Khayelitsha and other areas.

This article is a response to many reactionary organisations who have been against the people's struggle. The Khayelitsha Human Settlements Forum has said that "shack farming" will turn Khayelitsha into "Africa's Colombia". They talk of illegal occupations, with the intention of renting and selling structures. I contest the views of the Forum and say that most of the people who are occupying this land are people who have been living in backyards, people who have been renting other people's flats, and people who have been on the waiting list for more than 20 years.

I dismiss their point that the people who are occupying will be renting out the land. Instead, the Khayelitsha Human Settlement Forum is a group of landlords, who are made comfortable by the current system of people renting from their houses. Most of the people who are in that Forum own flats, and others in the same Forum have taken land for their own selfish interest, with some of them owning and renting out up to 7 RDP houses in Khayelitsha. Now

they are defending their interests of building many flats. People who are taking the land have seen these open spaces for more than 20 years. When they ask what the plans for the land are, the City of Cape Town never answers clearly.

So, there is no illegal occupation or so-called invasion. These are terms used by reactionary organisations and landlords. The Khayelitsha Human Settlements Forum is the same as the Khayelitsha Community Trust, which claims to represent Khayelitsha even though people in Khayelitsha do not know anything about these opportunistic structures, who are not democratic or transparent. When the black working class stands up and takes its place, these opportunistic structures side with the City of Cape Town. We know why they are siding with the City. These structures are corrupt and have been benefiting from City of Cape Town tenders. Individuals from these structures are using Khayelitsha to make money. For example, these opportunists are fighting over the land that is next to Khayelitsha Court. They

want to capture all the open lands for their selfish interests. They are power mongers, who sustain power by manipulating communities with false hope.

Further, many people have lost jobs as result of the COVID-19 pandemic. About 5 million people have been retrenched, and as a result have been evicted by landlords from places they have been renting. It is clear that these capitalist structures are not representing the working class in Khayelitsha.

Who cares if Khayelitsha is "shack farming" like Colombia? I support the effort that is made by communities in occupying the land. For years, the same open land has seen the bodies of dead people and criminal activities. When people occupy and make use of these open spaces, crimes will be lower than before.

It is time now for people to take land, and fight for houses when they get the land. The land question is historical, and it must be challenged as such. I encourage unity of struggle in all areas where people are taking land, both in Khayelitsha and outside of Khayelitsha.

GUEST ARTICLE by Natasha Vally and Shaera Kalla (C19 People's Coalition Cash Transfer Working Group)

TIME TO GIVE: GOVERNMENT MUST INCREASE AND EXTEND, NOT TERMINATE, ITS SOCIAL RELIEF GRANT

South Africa's inequality, poverty and hunger are neither an unexpected crisis nor a short-term problem, and the state's response should bear this in mind. Extending the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress Grant until 2022 would create time and space for more permanent income security measures.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic South Africa was the most unequal country in the world, with the wealthiest 10% of the population holding between 90% and 95% of the country's wealth. The pandemic has made the emergency more acute, but we've been in crisis for a very long time. To treat actions that relieve the emergency as temporary is to ignore how deeply embedded and structural the crisis is.

As the death toll of the second wave of COVID-19 continues to devastate the country and lockdown Level 3 remains in place, the government has taken the step to end the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant at the end of January 2021.

Moving forward, we need to consider the expanse of inequality in our country – in terms of scale and time. *Actions we take need to be widespread and long-term.*

The R350.00 monthly SRD grant has helped millions of families put food on the table following a year of massive job losses and deep economic and social distress. While insufficient, it has been crucial at a time where the poverty rate increased sharply, and the prices of food and household staples continue to rise. Our government cannot rightly call for physical distancing and solidarity on the one hand, and on the other create conditions where the most vulnerable are robbed of the social protection needed to survive this crisis.

Persistent and predictable

We write this piece with questions of temporality in mind. Words like "emergency", "crisis" and "distress" all imply an unexpected and short-term situation. However, many aspects of the emergency we find ourselves in are either persistent or predictable, often both. National Treasury has become even more intransigent in providing emergency funding for critical needs, including for a vaccine, despite numerous proposals by civil society on how to unlock resources.

Furthermore, a second wave of infections was predictable and the government should have put the necessary protective measures in place for individuals, households and businesses devastated by the economic crisis. Instead, two of the most important measures – the caregiver and SRD grants – have been terminated.

In October 2020, after sustained pressure, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the SRD grant would be extended for three months (until the end of January 2021). While the brief extension was welcomed, the withdrawal of the caregiver grant displayed contempt for women and children. We were also dismayed at the persistence of the insufficient grant amount, the period of extension and the dismal implementation of the SRD grant.

The child support grant is by far the biggest grant in terms of numbers, reaching 12.8 million children – nearly two-thirds of all children in South Africa. It is received every month by more than seven million adult caregivers and contributes to the income of nearly 5.7 million households. This



Socially distant queuing at a SASSA office in Soweto. Photograph: Marco Longari / AFP - Getty Images.

grant is a meagre R440.00 per month per child, which is below the food poverty line of R585.00. The caregiver grant was a monthly top-up of R500.00 given to caregivers (regardless of the number of children being cared for). Once this was terminated caregivers could not qualify for the SRD grant since they received the child support grant.

In this formulation, women are not only expected to take care of children but they are *punished* for it. In response to the initial civil society statement calling for the increase and an extension of the grant, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) expressed how vital the grants are for women, especially those suffering gender-based violence. If the government is to align its rhetoric to action it must either reinstate the caregiver grant or amend the SRD grant conditions to include caregivers to qualify.

Waiting

The centrality of time in the sphere of grants is perhaps most apparent in acts of waiting.

It is unfortunately not an anomaly for grant claimants to face long queues during the administration and payment of their grants. This brings additional insecurity during a pandemic when proximity and confinement escalate the risk of infection.

The violent treatment of poor and black grant claimants in lines outside SASSA offices and Post Office branches stands in stark and shameful contrast to the treatment of mostly white South Africans who protested on 30 January 2021 to open the beaches in the Western Cape. On 15 January grant claimants queuing outside SASSA offices in Bellville in the Western Cape to reapply for temporary disability grants were aggressively targeted water cannon. In the last week of January

claimants in queues were pepper-sprayed as they waited. Claimants find themselves risking infection and attack to claim their money.

Through our work with the #PayTheGrants Campaign we've been inundated with instances of applicants for the SRD grant waiting (sometimes indefinitely) for information about the outcome. Applicants have sometimes had to apply on a month-by-month basis – lacking clarity and waiting to hear whether they'll have the small cushion that R350.00 can provide.

We all find ourselves waiting again.

We wrote this on the last day of the month that the SRD grants were due to be terminated. Will millions of people be closer to starvation? The lack of clarity is deafening.

Yet, as the #PayTheGrants Campaign we find ourselves waiting for an urgent meeting with the president, the Ministry of Social Development and National Treasury, to whom we have written. Despite being in touch with us (slowly, belatedly and with little urgency) they have yet to confirm a meeting time. The demands that we laid out remain:

- Extend and increase the COVID-19 R350.00 SRD grants to at least the food poverty line of R585.00 per person per month;
- Reassess the unduly harsh and narrow criteria for accessing the grant;
- Ensure that caregivers qualify for the SRD grant, regardless of whether they are receiving a child support grant on behalf of their children;
- Institute retrospective pay for recipients in the event that the grant is not immediately extended; and
- Outline clear and urgent steps to progress towards implementation of the long-overdue basic income guarantee (grant) for those aged 18 to 59.

Depth and duration

We have been made aware that the Department of Social Development has put in a proposal to extend the COVID-19 grant for 15 months, but this needs to be approved by National Treasury.

In a closing address to the ANC lekgotla, Ramaphosa stated: "The lekgotla has agreed that, in the context of the continuing COVID pandemic, we need to consider the extension of basic income relief to unemployed people who do not receive any other form of state assistance." The extension of the income grant would "depend on the state of public finances", and "there should be a clear exit strategy".

The time for consideration is long expired and the implied exclusion of caregivers in this relief is worrying. Perhaps most illogical is the idea of an exit strategy – a phrase that ignores the depth and duration of our structural crisis.

We need to have the long term in mind. There are no permanent jobs, and unemployment will persist and worsen. We see our demand for the extended and increased COVID-19 SRD grant until the end of March 2022 as a way of creating time and space for more permanent income security. It is a temporary bridge towards implementing a basic income guarantee (BIG), demands for which will only continue to gain ferocity.

A BIG is feasible and long overdue.

Perhaps unexpectedly, as the C19 People's Coalition Cash Transfers Working Group we also see a universal basic income guarantee as a bridge. Our end goal is not, and has never been, a universal basic income guarantee, for as an end in itself it lacks imagination and radical redistributive justice. We do think, however, that a universal basic income guarantee can allow stability and, critically, time, as we organise and build towards a better world.

A poem prepared and performed by Soundz of the South at ILRIG's launch of the booklet 'Mapping the World of Casualised Work and Struggle in South Africa' on 18 February 2021.



Soundz of the South. Courtesy: Facebook.

THINA

Verse 1 – Karl Myx

What the hell is this
Every day I wake up at 4
Ndileq' uhalf past six
Picking up stuff
For Pick 'n Pay
Ndiqotywa nguCapacity
For a slave wage
I sacrifice my dreams
Feeling like a half man
Half machine
Damn that's how I feel
Less money more frustration
Kids need good education
Mama needs her medication
No work no pay for me
While the boss is on vacation
Living a good life sunshine by the ocean
They underpaid me for my day shift
Precarious work stuck in this modern day plantation
Many years still a slave and I haven't seen no difference

Verse 2 – Skillz

Bomi yintsomi siyakhuthuzwa
Singena ngendlovu siyafukuza
Siphila ngendlala kudalelonyala ligquba ngamandla alisothusi
Tata abadala basiqob'amandla
Kuchithek 'igazi lomntomnyama
Kudala sizama sisilwa ngamandla
Lenqwel'iyazika makudedubumnyama
Sifunulutsha olu radical
Ngqondo igcine icinge kulwiwe
Sifunutshintsh'oluradical
sonke singcandle ubuncwane kuyiwe
Ndicima ndibhala siqoma sibhaka sincuma sikhala sikhazala
Siphila ngesingqala kumoshakala siphilel' utexwa ziintsindabadala
Thath'isikhali siyempini sigece zibhace sizibethe zibhek'ehlathini
Yabona ke lamakwedini ngohlohlesabo zigcivale zibhek'ebantwini
Xawuqalungath' uthetha gqithi
Kubizwamarhati yabethwa ufakw' eVeneni
Zisithathe zasijula kwant' isidima sedaki yinyani zenzokubi

Chorus:

Sifun'uphakama
Ubomi buyasi xheshha
Uvum'ubaleka
Kuvum'ukoyiswa
Thina, Thina
As'vum'ujika
As'vum'uzika

Verse 3 - Anela

Kudala sisebenzel'amabhulu kwanele
Phum'uphulo basebenzi
yayele
Bath'usanolungakhaliyo lolufel'embelekwani
Mzabalazo wabasenzi uyaqhubeka
We got bills to pay, mouths to feed
Hence we selling our labour to exploitative companies
Like Shoprite Checkers
They feed on our desperation, we employed as part time workers
Over worked and underpaid
Nine to five we make them millions everyday
Ngob'ikhesel'alinalungelo
Sebenz'ukhokhobe kodwa awukho nalomvuzo
Cause our dreams of a better living condition to them will never matter

Verse 4 – Tsidi

Inkukhu ingeka lilizeli uzikhabe iingubo ngoba ixesha lixhatshwe yinja
Ushiye abantwana ematrasini uleqe uloliwe ngenj'ixukuxa
Uwayidudula udlala amapeka okwenja izikhotha amanxeba
Uzofika late emsebenzini ibunzi limanzi tixi
Umphathi ukulindle egayitini, written warning on your face
Unxibe iovaroll ungene emcimbini, ngumdolomba wezitya
kusekhitshini
Usebenza kanzima kaloku ekhaya uyintsika yokuphila
Usebenze uphiphe nezinja zabelungu
Andithethi iminyaka iqengqeleka ukhulisa intsana zabo
Xa ufika ekhaya abantwana abalufumani uthando lukamama
Xa kuphela inyanga sisiphithiphithi kumaxhaphetshu, umvuzo
wabasebenzi tshwaa ezipokothweni zabaphathi. Athi umlungu we
have a disturbing news we can't pay you all
Yinkathazo ,le yingcinezelo yabasebenzi babethwe ngenxele
likaketsekile.
Ikati ilele eziko
Umvuzo wabasebenzi unqumlw okwenkomo isilarhwa esilarheni
When they organise and mobilising banyusa idolo phezulu
Saxuthwa isonka emlonyeni, kwadendwa wadendwa kwaphela kwathi
tywaa

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Are you involved in progressive struggles or grassroots workplace/community organising that needs solidarity or that you think more activists should be made aware of? Do you have an analysis of or insights into a struggle or social/political/economic issue or development – whether local, regional or international – that is of interest or relevance to progressive/working class activists and struggles in South Africa that you would like to share? Do you have questions/comments about or disagreements with something published in Workers' World News?

Send us your article (max. 600 words) by email or Facebook private message and we will consider publishing it in a future issue.



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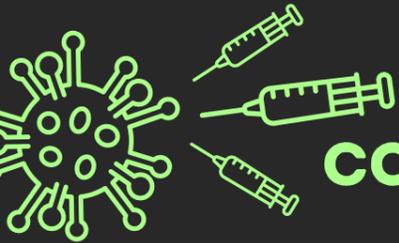
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WHY DO WE NEED COVID-19 VACCINES?

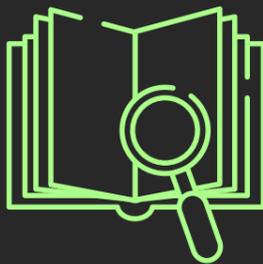
- In a short period of time, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the deaths of over 2.3 million people worldwide (as of 11 Feb 2021), and has exposed and worsened the violent conditions of capitalism. Vaccines are not a magical solution to the pandemic, but are an important and necessary part of overcoming the virus and alleviating the burden on the healthcare system and its workers.
- Vaccines are why diseases which were previously common and had high death rates, such as smallpox, polio and the measles, have either been eradicated or contained. If a large percentage of the population is vaccinated, we can not only drastically lower hospitalisation and death rates but achieve population immunity, where the virus can no longer rapidly spread from person to person.
- South Africa has felt the devastating impacts of the pandemic, not only through 1.5 million infections and over 40 000 deaths, but also in relation to increased unemployment, poverty, inequality, gender-based violence and state repression. Further, new variants of the virus confirm the need to develop adapted and new vaccines.

PEOPLE-LED AND FACT-BASED POPULAR EDUCATION



- There is a lot of uncertainty, apprehension and misinformation surrounding COVID-19 vaccines in South Africa. To overcome this, there is a need for widespread research-based popular education involving all sectors of society, including healthcare workers, unions, government and the private sector.
- While the scepticism towards vaccines is understandable given the disturbing history of medical imperialism and experimentation on black people, vaccines have also played an important role on the African continent in overcoming a number of epidemics and preventing deaths and have, in this way, also had a pro-poor impact.
- Similar to how social movements were central in the fight against the denialism and conspiracy theories around HIV/AIDS and in pushing the government to make antiretroviral drugs available, the struggle for COVID-19 vaccines and accurate information around them must also be led by the people.
- Our approach to vaccines must be based on proven scientific evidence that is peer-reviewed and independently checked. We cannot rely on misleading social media posts which ignore the facts.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS



AROUND COVID-19 VACCINES

MYTH 1: THE VACCINES ARE UNSAFE BECAUSE THE TRIALS WERE RUSHED

- While it is true that COVID-19 vaccines have been and continue to be developed in record time, there is no evidence to suggest shortcuts were taken with regard to safety protocols. For previous vaccines, independent experts would wait until clinical trials were complete before scrutinising data. In the case of COVID-19, data was analysed as the information came in to speed up the process. In addition, the COVID-19 vaccines benefitted from decades of research into coronaviruses, meaning that scientists were not starting from scratch.

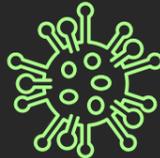


MYTH 4: IT IS SAFER TO CONTRACT THE VIRUS AND FIGHT IT THAN GET A VACCINE

- We do not yet have enough information to know how long the natural immunity people get after recovering from COVID-19 lasts, but it does appear to be shorter than the immunity provided by the vaccines. As we have seen in the pandemic, it is possible that people who have been infected with COVID-19 and recovered can become sick with the virus again. In addition, there are many risks related to contracting the virus, including the possibility of drawn-out symptoms and long-term complications, critical illness, and death. Getting vaccinated means not only protecting yourself but also protecting people in your community who might be more vulnerable than you.

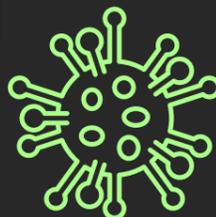
MYTH 2: THE VACCINES CAUSE INFERTILITY AND OTHER SIDE EFFECTS

- The idea that the vaccines cause infertility started because of a rumour that the protein which the vaccines train our bodies to identify and attack is similar to a protein required for the placenta to attach to the uterus throughout pregnancy, and the body might get confused and attack this vital protein as well, causing infertility. This is untrue- the proteins are in no way similar enough to confuse our immune systems and the vaccines will not affect fertility.
- There is little evidence to suggest that the vaccines will lead to long-term side effects since they do most of their job in the first few days and then leave the body, having taught our immune systems how to fight the virus. In reality, long-term heart and lung complications as a result of catching COVID-19 are far more likely.
- Some people have experienced short-term side effects which are similar to the side effects of other vaccines, such as fatigue or muscle pain. Such reactions are normal and usually short-lived, and they are a sign that the vaccine is working.



MYTH 5: THE VACCINES ARE BEING USED TO CHANGE OUR DNA OR INJECT MICROCHIPS

- There is confusion around the fact that some COVID-19 vaccines contain messenger RNA (mRNA). mRNA are molecules which carry instructions for producing proteins from one part of a cell to another. While mRNA is made from DNA (genetic material), it does not contain DNA. It cannot change our DNA because it cannot enter the part of our cells that contain DNA. Once the mRNA does its job of teaching our immune system to recognise and attack the virus, our cells break it down so it is no longer present in our body.
- There is no evidence that the vaccines contain microchips. In reality, powerful elites who wish to track and surveil us can already do so through our cellphones (and we must continue to expose and resist this).
- The theories that the vaccines are designed to change our DNA or to inject microchips into us is driven by the idea that the vaccines are being pushed on people against their will. In reality, they are actually being withheld from the poor and socially-excluded through exclusive contracts and patents which restrict free access, while political and economic elites are prioritised as first in line to receive vaccines.



MYTH 3: THE VACCINES WILL GIVE YOU COVID-19 OR MAKE YOU MORE VULNERABLE TO CONTRACTING OTHER ILLNESSES

- It is not possible for the vaccines to give you COVID-19 because the vaccines do not contain any active forms of the virus. Vaccines work by training your immune system to recognise and fight a virus but cannot cause infections themselves. Vaccines do not weaken but rather boost your immune system and therefore do not make you more vulnerable to other illnesses.

TOWARDS A PUBLIC AND EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF VACCINES!

- Vaccines must be made widely and freely available. There must be a collective, public approach to the development, costing and distribution of all vaccines, as opposed to the privatised vaccine nationalism currently underway. This will require the government to adopt an approach that serves people over profit. We should learn from countries in the Global South which have successfully managed to control the virus so far, such as Cuba, Vietnam, Taiwan and Mauritius, for positive examples of what can be done in parallel to vaccinations.
- Big Pharma must not be allowed to make super-profits and own the intellectual property rights. The neoliberal model of outsourcing and using middle companies which profit from the rollout of vaccines must be rejected. Vaccines are a public good and their development has been largely paid for through public funds. Vaccines must be decommodified and made available for free to all.
- There must not be a class or racial hierarchy in the distribution of the vaccines. After the groups of people identified as first in line, the vaccines must be equitably distributed to all.
- Since there is a great deal of justified distrust of the South African government's ability to deliver basic public goods and services, and to act in the interests of the poor and working class, there must be meaningful involvement of workers and communities in the roll-out of the vaccine programme.

THE WORKING CLASS MUST CONTINUE TO BUILD UNITY AND ORGANISE TO FIGHT FOR THE VACCINES, FOR AN END TO THE PANDEMIC, AND ULTIMATELY TO REPLACE A DEADLY AND GREEDY CAPITALIST SYSTEM!



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