



UNIONS IN CRISIS

HAS THE UNION FORM OUTLIVED ITS USEFULNESS FOR WORKERS?

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by Dale T. McKinley

A deep, systemic crisis

There can be little argument that the world of work in South Africa and indeed globally, is in the throes of a deep, systemic crisis, made all the worse by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

At one level, there are record levels of socio-economic inequality between those that own the means of production and those that produce, which is threatening to pauperise the vast majority of workers. At another level, workers and worker organisations are increasingly divided, ideologically, socially, economically and organisationally, with the general state of the trade union movement being one of disorientation and weakness. The institutional and organisational moorings that previously allowed for the strategic building of more inclusive, militant and effective unions as well as the catalysing of working-class unity in action, have largely crumbled or been captured by corporatists, corrupt bureaucrats, abstentionists and sectarian/factional politics.

As a result, the core principles and values that previously undergirded worker organisation and struggles have receded in the face of unprecedented waves of material desperation, opportunism and reaction. It is not a pretty picture and even more so in a country like South Africa with its deep history of racial and class conflict, and its status as the most unequal nation in the world.

This, combined with the present harsh reality which sees the organised working class as well as progressive/left forces in general fighting (mostly) defensive, pandemic-fuelled battles, raises the question of whether or not the union form has outlived its usefulness for workers, as a historically central component of working-class organisation and struggle?

A crisis of worker participation and representation

In this respect, there are three unfortunately enduring features of South Africa's post-1994 union picture:

- a) a minority of workers are union members, with the latest Stats SA figures showing that as of 2018, only 29.5% of employees are members of a trade union;
- b) a fundamental failure to politically and organisationally see and acknowledge casualised workers, not only as equals but as forming the majority of the working class;
- c) increasing organisational and material gaps between union leadership/officials and rank-and-file members as well as a general lack of assistance to and representation of those members.

If any further proof was needed of why unions have become increasingly ring-fenced from the majority of workers, it can be found in a 2018 COSATU survey which showed that many union officials considered the financial and human resource 'costs' of organising and recruiting casual workers too high for the consequent 'return' in union subscriptions. Indeed, because the membership of most existing unions is overwhelmingly taken up by male permanent workers who are themselves insecure about their jobs and social status, the general attitude and approach to casual workers (and more especially women workers who make up a majority of casual workers) is either one of indifference or hostility and control.



Alternative forms and possibilities: Argentina's *Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular (UTEP - Union of Workers of the Popular Economy)* Photograph: CTEP - Confederation of the Workers of the Popular Economy.

A crisis of consciousness

It is instructive that for the most part, workers' social, political, economic and moral consciousness has been missing from the strategic radar of unions for the better part of South Africa's post-apartheid transition. Much like the party, state and social movement terrains, the personal has been largely removed as a central component in shaping and guiding both individual and collective practice. This has produced a situation in which large parts of the labour sector, constitutive of both individual union leaders and rank-and-file workers, have contributed negatively to (re)shaping the landscape of political and socio-economic possibility, and what it means to be a progressive worker/activist building and engaging in inclusive and tolerant organisation and struggle.

The harsh reality is that, with some exceptions, basic ethics and values of honesty, respect, humility, accountability, empathy, responsibility, solidarity, and generosity that informed the huge personal sacrifices for, and collective moral power of, past worker and liberation movement struggles in South Africa have been largely cast aside. Tragically, such ethical 'load-shedding' has not receded in the face of the present pandemic despite the desperate need for the opposite.

In their place we have witnessed many union leaders and officials being preoccupied with high-end lifestyles alongside personal enrichment and accumulation (with investment companies at the heart of this); prioritising factional power-mongering; and engaging in destructive, socially reactionary behaviour. Here, there are simply far too many examples involving the various leadership levels of established trade unions and their federations over the years, especially when it comes to violence against women. As Mandy Moussouris asked soon after the formation of SAFTU: 'What exactly is the new federation going to do to ensure that women do not continue to be used as political tools in a battle of men over power?'

A crisis of organisational form

Given the generalised crises of the labour movement and associated left forces as well as the parallel crisis of secure, permanent work, the key question is what organisational form and character will best serve the interests of workers, whatever their employment status?

Historically in South Africa, the union form has been dominant, not only because of the central role unions played in the anti-apartheid struggle but because the post-1994 labour market terrain has been institutionally, legally and procedurally constructed to privilege unions as the principal form of worker representation and voice. Indeed, that terrain has effectively demanded the formalisation of worker organisation into the union form as the pre-requisite for recognition by employers and participation in the institutional and legal-procedural frame.

Besides the not-so-insignificant financial and human resources as well as legal-institutional expertise needed to set up and sustain a union, the union form in South Africa has been mostly characterised by exclusivity and hierarchy, which have gone hand-in-hand with formalisation. They are exclusive in the sense that unions represent a shrinking minority of workers, and hierarchical because all unions have embraced formal leadership positions differentiated by title and salary, centralised bodies of executive authority at the core of regular decision-making and the general dominance of men at all levels of the organisation.

While the form of worker organisation does not completely determine its core character, the two are in many ways inter-linked. The form can go a long way in determining not just how effective the organisation is in: a) practically advancing the workplace struggles of its members; b) creating links with other workers and the broader working class, not just in the workplace but on a more mass, campaigning and solidaristic character; and c) in responding to the overall needs of those members and reflecting its stated values and principles as well as aims and objectives, especially in times of multi-sided, systemic crises.

With some exceptions, unions in South Africa and globally have largely proven to be ill-fitted to the overall and rapidly changing structure of the working class, conditions of work and the needs of both union members and other workers.

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EDITORIAL

In this issue of Workers World News, we focus on experiences of working and organising under COVID-19.

The Lead Article by Dale T. McKinley considers the current crisis faced by the labour movement and the left in general. McKinley asks us to re-examine the usefulness of the traditional trade union form of labour organisation, given an increasingly fractured and disorganised working class (especially in the context of COVID-19), and the ineffectiveness and unwillingness of many trade unions in South Africa to build strong principled movements which are able to keep up with the changing nature of the workforce and win worker demands.

In Gender News, an interview by Alex Hotz with South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) Deputy Chairperson and Treasurer Gladys Mnyengeza provides a glimpse into the personal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of domestic workers who, overwhelmingly in South Africa and globally, are women. Mnyengeza shares her experiences of working as a domestic worker during lockdown, and what it has meant for her to struggle alongside with, and offer support to, other domestic workers as a member of SADSAWU. This theme of the importance of worker organisation and solidarity, particularly amongst casualised workers, is extended in the My Struggle section, as Dale T. McKinley chats with Sydney Moshooliba, an organiser with the Simunye Workers Forum (SWF) and Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO). In this interview, Moshooliba reflects both on the difficulties that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have unleashed on casual workers in particular, as well as on the new possibilities for organising, and the resilience of workers revealed in this context.

In International News, Mahmoud Patel from People Against Apartheid and Fascism (PAAF) looks at the COVID-19 crisis in India and the dangerous inaction and claiming of false victories by Modi's government. This article reflects the need to remain vigilant and critical of what states are doing, and not doing, in response to the pandemic. The Guest Article by Kenneth Matlawe from Housing Assembly also casts an eye to the state by providing a critical analysis of the Expropriation Bill, currently open for public comment. Matlawe outlines what this Bill exposes about the ANC government, as well as what it means for community-led land occupations and the struggle for land and housing. This again points to the need for vigilance by those in struggle, particularly in the current context of increased state repression and corruption brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

Our Educational Series on worker cooperatives continues in this issue, in line with ILRIG's focus on the need for alternative forms of organising which promote progressive and democratic principles and values, and the fact that COVID-19 has exposed the urgent need for such alternative organisations. In part 2 of this series, Leila Khan looks at examples of worker cooperatives globally and historically, and the inspiration and warnings that can be drawn from these alternative forms of organising. On the Cultural Page, The Botsotso Ensemble introduces their new radio play *To TINA or Not to TINA*, produced in partnership with ILRIG, which also reflects on the importance of learning from alternatives. In addition, this article considers the state of community radio, and the need to revive and strengthen community radio stations as platforms for working class movements.

This issue features a poster by UK-based Afro-indigenous non-binary trans artist Blk Moody Boi declaring solidarity with the people of Colombia and Palestine, and all oppressed peoples struggling against colonialism and imperialism around the world.

Pull-out poster

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Illustration by **Blk Moody Boi**
(Instagram: @blkmoodyboi)

GENDER NEWS by Alex Hotz & Gladys Mnyengeza

DOMESTIC WORKERS: WE CONTINUE TO CARRY THE LOAD!

Extracts from an interview with Gladys Mnyengeza, a domestic worker and Deputy Chairperson and Treasurer of the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU).

My name is Gladys Mnyengeza. I am 67 years old; I am married, and I am staying in Kuyasa, Khayelitsha with my husband, children and grandchildren. I am still working as a domestic worker at 67 years old and I am working for this family for 38 years. You know I have been working in many places... but with this family I have been working for two days a week and then some more days for 38 years. Do you know Town? Do you know Higgovale? I am working there.

Going to work during the COVID-19 pandemic

You know it's very bad, I stayed at home for 3 months...I work for the family only twice a week but I work for the whole family, sometimes my employer's son will ask me to come and look after the house or babysit. It's very sad because, you know, you used to see your friends, now you don't see your friends anymore. You know now in this time of COVID-19 I was catching the taxi. You find out in the taxi, they don't care. They are supposed to give us sanitiser, but they haven't got...they don't want to do what the government said...so we have to just sit there because you can't say anything to the taxis. So that was the first fear. Then to find out two of my friends died. It was so sad because I couldn't go to my friend in Site B...we used to travel together. I couldn't go there because I am scared and the law said 50 [people could] go to the funeral. So that hurts you, you know, because we have been together for more than 40 years.

It's very sad, you hear the stories of domestic workers who are losing their jobs and they get nothing. Like in March, they got half but then after March the employer says, "I can't pay you because of COVID-19". The other bad thing is now they are saying that it is us domestic workers bringing this COVID-19 into their houses. I will tell you something that I saw one morning. Next door to where I work there is a lady working there. The lady called me and she said, "Gladys can you stand there [upstairs]". [I work in] a double story, so when you stand upstairs you see the other house. When I look at my friend, the lady who called me, I saw the employer undress her outside on the veranda...she undresses her there and then after...she takes those things, you know, that the doctors are using...I think they [wear] those things when they go for operations. It's just like that but it's a plastic one...the employer covered her with this thing and then she takes something that looks like a belt and puts it around her hips and puts another thing over it, and then she leaves the lady's clothes outside. My question was this, if she must wear something like this, does her employer also wear something like this inside the house? And then we see the employer coming outside with no mask, no nothing. But it was so sad to me, it's like they are saying that the domestic workers are bringing COVID-19 in their houses. That's why they treat the domestic workers like this.

The other case that I am dealing with is this domestic worker who was told by her employer to come and live with her from June until December. She said to her employer, "I can't do that because I have kids. Who is going to do my kids' homework?

Who is going to look after my kids because they are still very small?" But the employer said if she doesn't stay there, she will have to find another person [to work for]. She started working somewhere else and this employer has still not paid her. She then says she must go and claim UIF, only to find out that the employer did not register her. Then [the employer] eventually said, "I will give you your wages for 3 months and my father's old car". Can you believe that? So, we get these situations... it's like they are saying the domestic workers brought this virus here – but it's not like that.

I am working in an area where most of the white people know me, and sometimes they say, "can you see Gladys, she put her mask under her nose". But [they are] shouting this to me when [they are] not wearing a mask! So sometimes I want to respond and ask, "where is your mask?" But then they will say I am being rude, so I just keep quiet.

Joining the Union

I think I joined SADSAWU [The South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union] in 2007. I actually had a problem with my other employer in Sea Point, so I went to the CCMA and when I was there...there was a lady who said there is a union for domestic workers. So I went to Salt River, she gave me the address, and I found Myrtle and Hester there and I joined the union [to deal with] the problem that I had [with my employer]. I am very happy that I joined SADSAWU. That is why I am still standing here, because I told myself I have to stand for the workers. I am now the Deputy Chairperson and Treasurer of SADSAWU nationally and here in the Western Cape. As SADSAWU we give support...I take lots of cases. If I cannot take the case I will send them to head office. I ask Myrtle, "can I call the employer?", because I remember in May I phoned two employers and I solved two cases through the phone with the employers.

It's very difficult. We have domestic workers coming to the office and there are many cases during this time of COVID. Another thing is... employers will tell you to go [claim] UIF, and when the domestic worker gets there...she will find out that the employer has not registered her. As domestic workers it is so hard, we often do not know where to go...even the Labour Department does not care for us as domestic workers. I won't run away from that, you see, because most domestic workers we do not understand the laws of labour. That's why we have all these workshops for domestic workers so that they understand the laws. But it is so difficult. What must we do when the employer says they cannot pay her? Where is the domestic worker going to get money because she did work for that month but now the employer says, "I cannot give you this amount because I haven't gotten money". We must stand with the domestic worker not for the employer. When it comes to the domestic workers we are always suffering, not the employer.

I will be very glad if I can see my friends and colleagues again. I think I will see them. This virus will come down and then we can see each other. I will be very glad to see them. You know in Town there is a café there in Golden Acre. In the morning, before we go to work, we meet there, and we talk and talk. And then we go to our work. It was only this morning I saw one of the ladies. We were so happy you won't believe. We were laughing. You know mos our people, we like to hug. We hugged each other this morning but after we hugged, she said to me, "Mama, we [are] not supposed to hug". But we had hugged already.



Photograph: Alice Morrison

UNIONS IN CRISIS continued:

Alternative forms and possibilities

Whatever the cumulative crises of unions, they are not about to just disappear or be wholly replaced by more democratic, worker-controlled forms of organisation, even if there is a strong case to be made for such. Nonetheless, the fact is that over the last 20 years, the key foundation of gains for workers (both unionised and otherwise), has come from creative, mass, collective action outside of the formal/legislative labour institutional framework, of NEDLAC, of tripartite corporatist negotiations and of bargaining councils. In other words, from collectively-conceptualised and independently-practiced class struggle, regardless of the dominant worker organisational form.

This includes non-union worker collectives such as the African Reclaimers Organisations (ARO) who are considering adopting a model of 'community membership', wherein middle-class supporters etc. can join as 'activists' and lend their expertise and practical support. In this way, the organisational form is built to cover the multiple and changing needs of members; for example, kitchens supplying food to workers and their families, rehabilitation centres and the occupation and self-management of empty spaces for production.

In this respect, workers in South Africa would be well-served to look for example, at the Argentine *Unión de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Economía Popular* (UTEP - Union of Workers of the Popular Economy). Formed in 2011 as a confederation

and bringing together self-employed and casualised workers in various recycling, textile and housing cooperatives together with worker-recovered enterprises, UTEP has more recently formed itself into a new type of 'extended trade-union'. Crucially, UTEP's underlying ideological frame, principles, values and social relations are at the centre of its organisational form and practice. In this way, it is able to adapt its forms of organising to the holistic needs of all members, dependants and supporters, coterminous with a solidaristic and movement-building focus and intent. What better way for workers to organise themselves when confronted by the current, ever-shifting crisis?

Regardless of what often seems like a horizon of terminal decline and disappointment, if we allow ourselves, we can see the current and coming period as heralding a different kind of transition; one of possibility. If, as is clearly the case, the present union form as well as the labour movement as a whole needs to be reimagined and rebuilt, then it is within and alongside the world of casualised work (which houses the majority of workers in multiple communities), where this can be done.

Here, there is the possibility of a future in which much of the old ideological, organisational and discursive baggage can be offloaded, in which new spaces for critical thinking and debate can be created, in which progressive and personal as well as collective social and moral values and principles can be committed to, and in which the basics of inclusive and grounded organisational forms and struggles can take centre stage.

EDUCATIONAL SERIES: PART 2 | by Leila Khan

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIMENTS IN WORKER COOPERATIVES: LESSONS AND INSPIRATION FOR ANTI-CAPITALIST ORGANISING



In part 1 of this educational series, we discussed that while worker cooperatives do not have the capacity on their own to threaten the capitalist system, and in many cases operate like any other capitalist enterprise, they can be used to support working class struggles, win strategic gains for workers, and create spaces for practicing democratic and sustainable forms of organising. In this article, we will look at a few international examples where workers have either taken over their workplace and formed cooperatives or started new cooperatively-run organisations. These examples were chosen specifically because they emphasise collective and democratic worker control, and therefore can deepen our understanding of how worker cooperatives can be a tool for those struggling towards a radically different world beyond capitalist inequality and exploitation.

Sonali Tea Estate (1973-1981): An experiment in farmworker control in India

In the context of India's struggling tea industry, which saw declining productivity and an overreliance on bank loans, the owners and management of the Sonali Tea Garden in the state of West Bengal abandoned their plantation in 1973. The workers attempted to claim the wages they were owed from a director of the company. Instead of paying these wages, he offered to transfer ownership of the tea garden to the workers (although a title deed was never formally registered). The following year, the workers formed the Saongaon Tea and Allied Plantation Workers' Cooperative Society and elected a Board of Directors from amongst themselves to replace the management committee. The Board took decisions only after mass meetings with workers, and workers could attend and participate in Board meetings. Some of the outcomes of mass meetings were that wages were increased, women workers were given equal pay, and workloads were reduced. Coercive mechanisms for disciplining workers, such as charge sheets, were done away with, and workers instead held regular meetings to discuss the importance of caring for the tea garden as worker-owners. Managers from neighbouring farms who struggled to get workers to arrive on time were stunned by the fact that Sonali workers were usually punctual.

By 1977, the tea garden had produced its highest yield in its history, had paid all outstanding wages, had acquired new assets including a tractor and storage facility, and had a substantial surplus in its bank account. This was all from its own sales, and without any government or bank assistance. Tragically, the previous owners saw the workers' success and wanted the plantation back, dragging the cooperative into a lengthy and costly legal battle over ownership. The cooperative was eventually forced to hand over the plantation and the democratic forms of organising and improvements in working conditions implemented by the cooperative were undone.

Despite this defeat, this experiment in worker control shows that workers were able to continue production, and do so successfully, without oppressive hierarchies or bosses exploiting their labour. The Saongaon cooperative allowed workers to take back their jobs and improve their working conditions, while at the same time crafting a space in which genuine democracy and consensus-building could be practiced.

ASMARE (1990-present): A cooperative of waste collectors in Brazil

Informal waste workers play a critical role in recycling and reducing the state's task of waste management. Despite this, they face continuous harassment by police and local governments because they are often homeless and viewed as a nuisance. In response to this persecution and to better their living and working conditions, (waste collectors) in Bela Horizonte, Brazil, formed the Association of Paper, Cardboard and Reusable

Materials Collectors (ASMARE) in 1990. Through mobilising and organising, ASMARE managed to secure a partnership with the municipality's Public Cleansing Agency (SLU) as well as ownership of land they had been occupying to sort recyclables. This partnership provided subsidies, recycling warehouses, trucks, and other infrastructure to enable ASMARE's integration into the municipality's recycling scheme.

ASMARE functions as a worker cooperative and is organised into a steering committee of *catadores* which is newly elected every few years, and various sub-committees. Members are trained in administration skills to enable labour rotation and skills development, and homeless people outside of the cooperative are trained to sort waste and earn income through recycling. The cooperative also started an art centre for *catadores* and their children to make art, jewellery, and furniture from recyclables to sell for extra income. In order to build solidarity and support for ASMARE and to reduce harassment faced by *catadores*, the cooperative regularly organises cultural activities such as theatrical performances and concerts for the public.

ASMARE has had to navigate its relationship with the state carefully to ensure that the many *catadores* cooperatives who are not recognised by the municipality, as well as those non-organised *catadores* who are in the vast majority, are not left behind. This has meant rejecting agreements with the municipality that would effectively criminalise waste collecting of unrecognised *catadores* and insisting on the participation of other *catadores* groupings in discussions. ASMARE also belongs to a broader network of *catadores* cooperatives called *Cataunidos* aimed at strengthening the ability of *catadores* to negotiate in government forums. As a worker-owned and operated cooperative, ASMARE has organised and empowered *catadores* to improve their incomes and working conditions, increase their support from the public and local authorities, as well as build solidarity, shape policy and voice their demands on their own terms.

Zanon Ceramics/ FaSinPat (2001-present): A factory without bosses in Argentina

Argentina's 2001 financial crisis led to widespread business closures and job losses. In response to this, and as part of a movement of factory takeovers around the country, workers at Zanon Ceramics factory occupied their workplace and began production under their own control. Zanon workers did not want to register as a cooperative because of the limitations of this model. For example, as cooperative members they would no longer be considered as workers in terms of the law, and would lose certain labour rights. In addition, they would have to abide by regulations that the government was forcing on cooperatives at the time in order to control factory takeovers. After intense state repression however, the workers eventually formed a cooperative under the name *Fábrica Sin Patronos* (FaSinPat), meaning Factory Without Bosses.

To ensure that they practice full worker control and democracy within the cooperative form, FaSinPat is managed through a workers' council,

made up of elected coordinators from each production sector of the factory. These coordinator roles rotate so that management responsibility is shared by all workers. Worker assemblies are where all decisions are made, and any resolutions of the council are brought to factory-wide general assemblies for approval. Through worker control, the workers of FaSinPat have made conscious efforts to resist capitalist exploitation and protect workers. When production increases, instead of contracting workers at low wages and keeping extra profits for cooperative members, new workers are brought into the cooperative as members. When demand is low and production is down, workers choose to take collective pay cuts before laying off workers.

The workers of FaSinPat have built a strong mutually supportive relationship with the surrounding community and allied community struggles. Many community members bought ceramic tiles from the factory when it was struggling to find its feet after the takeover. Once the factory started doing well, new cooperative members were brought in from the Unemployed Workers' Movement and other organisations that had shown solidarity with the workers' occupation. FaSinPat also regularly donates part of its surplus to local hospitals, schools and other community institutions and projects.

Through their emphasis on worker control and cooperation, the workers of FaSinPat have significantly strengthened their organising power. They have built an organisation in which their individual and collective capacities for democracy are tested, and through which they can better engage in solidarity and struggle.

PT Istana (2007-2008): A women-led factory occupation in Indonesia

Indonesia has a long and formidable labour movement history which includes many examples of workers taking over their workplaces, whether from colonial powers or capitalist bosses, as a strategy to defend and advance their struggles. One powerful and relatively recent example is PT Istana, a garment factory in Northern Jakarta that was taken over by its workers and run as a worker cooperative. In 2007, the owner of PT Istana closed the factory abruptly, declaring bankruptcy and refusing to pay severance packages to the hundreds of dismissed workers, the majority of whom were women. The workers decided to take the owner to labour court for severance pay, and to occupy the factory. During the occupation, they set up a cooperative and continued production in order to support themselves during their legal action. An Occupied Factory Committee was democratically elected to run the cooperative, and job rotation was introduced to share work equally, build skillsets, and avoid boredom. The factory space was reimagined through the setting up of a public kitchen, the provision of childcare, and the holding of mass meetings. In this way, workers challenged the capitalist separation of work and community, and attempted to alleviate the reproductive labour that women are overwhelmingly assigned.

The workers defended the occupation against multiple eviction and intimidation attempts by

the owner, and ultimately won their court case. However, the PT Istana worker cooperative could not sustain itself economically. The cooperative struggled to make enough money after several big international buyers pulled out because of the worker takeover, and the factory was hit with floods and electricity cuts. PT Istana workers were unable to make connections with workers at the state-owned electricity company and so could not overcome this problem. Their legal win was also a double-edged sword, in that the factory's assets needed to be auctioned to pay the owner's debts and the severance packages. Only a few workers continued to produce for the cooperative from their homes. Although short-lived, this experiment in worker ownership had valuable impacts on the workers involved, who felt empowered to shape their working conditions and produce without a boss.

What lessons?

These examples of worker cooperatives, which emphasise worker control, democratic structures and collective ownership, show that the limited space provided for cooperatives within capitalism can be used by workers to carve out valuable organising and solidarity-building spaces. Workers in these spaces have a greater ability to shape their working conditions, and are empowered to demand more in terms of democratic participation in other spaces. They have minimised hierarchy and punishment, and prioritised the needs of marginalised groups such as women and the homeless, while still being able to produce or provide a service. Critically, they shatter the myth that production can only take place under conditions of capitalist exploitation. Because the survival of many worker cooperatives relies on linkages with other workers and communities, relationships are formed and resources are shared which sustain organisations and strengthen working class unity.

There are clear challenges that come with this organisational form, including the need to compete with capitalist firms, and the fact that cooperatives without state support must struggle to defend themselves against repression by the state and bosses. However, these experiments- even where they have ended in defeat- have played a crucial role supporting workers in moments of crisis. Through worker cooperatives, especially those started through takeovers, workers were able to save themselves from unemployment, financially support themselves during legal actions, and even create new jobs. This pushes us to consider how worker takeovers and the formation of cooperatives might be better incorporated in the strategy and tactics of labour movements. American labour organiser Lucy Parsons reflected this sentiment in 1905 at the Founding Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) when she said,

"My conception of the strike of the future is not to strike and go out and starve, but to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production."

These examples encourage us to think through how and whether worker cooperatives might have some role in play in South Africa. In the current crisis we are facing, which has already seen rising liquidations and unemployment as capitalists protect their profits over the lives of workers, are there opportunities for South African workers to use worker takeovers and cooperative structures as a strategic tool? In line with this, the next article in this series will consider worker cooperatives in the South African context.

1. From part 1 in this series: "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. This refers to labour done in the home, including childcare, cooking and cleaning. Women are usually expected to do this work on their own, and many women workers get home from their paid work only to perform unpaid domestic labour (this is referred to as the 'double burden of care').

INTERNATIONAL NEWS by Mahmoud Patel (People Against Apartheid and Fascism)

A PYRRHIC VICTORY: INDIA, NARENDRA MODI AND COVID-19

After the first COVID-19 wave subsided last year, the government of Narendra Modi declared a victory against the pandemic.

Despite the warning from scientific advisers set up by the government in early March 2021 of a new and more contagious variant of the coronavirus taking hold in the country, four of the scientists said the federal government did not seek to impose major restrictions to stop the spread of the virus. Millions of unmasked people attended religious festivals and political rallies that were held by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and opposition politicians. Perhaps it truly believed its own propaganda. At the World Economic Forum in January 2021, Modi said: "In a country which is home to 18% of the world population, that country has saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively." India's total COVID-19 cases now stand at 29.2 million after rising by 94,052 in the space of 24 hours, while total fatalities are at 359,676, according to data from the health ministry. The Health Department of one of India's poorest states Bihar, revised its total COVID-19 related death toll on Wednesday to more than 9,400.

What is unfolding in India is more than a crisis triggered by a virus. It is a massacre precipitated by the conduct of its self-enamoured leader. After Modi's Davos speech, his administration went out of its way to soothe Indians into the suicidal belief that the worst was behind them. In February 2021, Modi's Hindu-first BJP passed a resolution praising his "leadership for introducing India to the world as a ...victorious nation in the fight against COVID-19." "It can be said with pride," the resolution proclaimed, that India "defeated COVID-19 under the able, sensitive, committed, and visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi." This pyrrhic victory and arrogant claim is doubly painful as India grappled with a wave that made the earlier one pale in comparison.

The BJP focused on how to convert this "success" into electoral victory for the upcoming state elections when the second wave struck. As the numbers began to rise, the BJP decided that if it could not control the pandemic it would attempt to control the narrative. It went on the offensive, with its troll army amplifying the message: the state governments have failed; the people are to blame for abandoning the safety norms of masks and social distancing; everyone is to blame except us. However, the central government's signal of a return to normalcy with public rallies, election campaigns and large religious gatherings meant that if people did relax the COVID-19 norms, they

were following the example of Modi and other leaders during these events.

Prime Minister Modi belatedly shared plans to build more oxygen facilities. By the time they become fully operational thousands of Indians will have lost their lives. It is no longer justifiable to measure Modi against the performance of previous Prime Ministers as he has become like India's British colonial overlords who went hunting while Indians starved in mass famines. Modi was banned from travel to western countries several years ago because of his role in the genocide in the state of Gujarat. Modi and most of his ministers belong to a far-right Hindu supremacist organisation whose founders openly admired the Nazis.

India's dire condition today is a consequence of Modi's methodical demolition of the institutional safeguards left by the country's founders. Concentrating authority in his own hands and erecting a cult of personality unmatched in the "democratic" world, Modi has dismantled virtually every institution that might have compelled him to react swiftly to this calamity.

The first COVID-19 wave peaked around mid-September 2020, touching nearly 100,000 new infections per day. It had gone down to about 10,000 by mid-February 2021. This period should have been used to strengthen the public health system by increasing hospital beds, ICU facilities, increasing oxygen production and building a

supply chain for its delivery. Tragically, the central government, which has centralised all powers under the Disaster Management Act, refused to prepare either itself, or the states, or the public, for this second wave.

In March 2020 after plunging India into chaos by announcing a nationwide lockdown with a 4-hour notice, Prime Minister Modi sought tax-free donations for a fund called PM CARES to help the poor buy personal protective equipment, and build oxygen plants across India. More than a billion dollars flowed into it during the first week. What did Modi do with all that money? Nobody knows—and nobody is allowed to know. Because despite offering tax subsidies to contributors and using government organs to promote the fund, PM CARES cannot be reviewed by the state auditor because it is structured as a private trust.

The worst failing in the current crisis is the lack of oxygen as the lungs of patients are affected. These patients are unable to get admissions in hospitals; they are dying as hospitals run out of oxygen and oxygen cylinders are not available for home treatment. Modi promised "maximum governance", but rather than reform India's outdated state, he has centralised power like no other leader in India's democratic history. A crisis of this magnitude would stress even the world's best healthcare system. In India, it has exposed a pre-existing frailty – a broken state, and failed leadership who belong behind bars.

GUEST ARTICLE by Kenneth Matlawe (Housing Assembly)

THE EXPROPRIATION BILL: 'LAND RIGHTS' OVER THE RIGHT TO LAND

After many land occupations and anti-eviction struggles, South Africa witnessed a presidential pronouncement on the expropriation of land, a number of national hearings on the question and, finally open for public comment, the stage is set for the introduction of an Expropriation Bill.

With organisations, communities and individuals readying themselves to comment and probably thinking this is a victory in the struggle for the right to land, this article claims the contrary. That, firstly, most if not all occupations started as a result of a housing need, but the Expropriation Bill focuses on 'land rights' rather than the right to land. Secondly, that the Expropriation Bill is nothing more than a strategic response from the ANC government to widespread land occupations and the accompanying disillusionment with the ANC. Lastly, the Expropriation Bill not only illustrates the reluctance of the ANC government to depart from its 'willing seller, willing buyer' approach, but is an attempt at turning a political struggle into a legal one, assuming that the courts are neutral and objective, devoid of class analysis.

Most, if not all, land occupations and the consequent anti-eviction struggles have occurred as a result of the housing crisis, as a product of a housing need. Land occupations have mainly been for the creation of informal settlements, however, the Expropriation Bill has shifted the focus from the broader right to land to individual land rights. As Zachary Levenson notes in *Living on the Fringe*, housing provision is faced with the conundrum

of either providing housing on the periphery of cities and the costs of servicing and providing the amenities needed there, or providing housing within the city but putting a lot of strain on the existing infrastructure and the high maintenance costs attached. This conundrum remains to be addressed. In essence, the reason for most land occupations – i.e. the right to land and to the city – will be swept off the table. Land occupations are collective actions and community struggles, but the implementation and application of the Bill will reduce this collectivity to individual registered and unregistered land rights. It is evident that no progress will be made when land reform or expropriation is discussed without the issue of the housing crisis and/or vice versa. In other words, the Bill addresses the question of (or at least will curb the swell in) occupations and not the reason for the occupations. It will address the act of occupying rather than the cause and effect of the conditions that produce occupations.

Secondly, the Bill is at best the ANC government's opportunistic response to widespread land occupations and the eviction battles between communities and state institutions. These battles have brought with them a growing disillusionment with the ANC government. It is no secret that within the last decade, the ANC has not only lost voters at a national level with the creation of yet another break-away party, the EFF; but also on a provincial level with the loss of control over Nelson Mandela Bay, City of Tshwane and City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipalities. It is of no coincidence that – with the growth of the EFF at the expense

of ANC voters and on a 'land expropriation without compensation' ticket straight into the top three biggest political parties in parliament on one hand, and the increase in land occupations and related struggles all over the country on the other – the ANC government launched its own motion of 'land expropriation without compensation'. However, if the ANC government genuinely wanted to expropriate land, it would have done so already through the 1997 White Paper on Land Reform and/or long before land occupations and community struggles were institutionally criminalised. Most importantly, the ANC government should have introduced an expropriation bill back when the 'market' and 'international best practice' were not the main determining factors and guidelines of our democratic dispensation's *modus operandi*. In other words, the Bill is a response to counter the political losses the ANC has suffered, rather than a meaningful attempt to implement expropriation aimed at addressing inequality, landlessness and homelessness.

Lastly, the Expropriation Bill is an attempt to turn political struggles into court battles. If the land claims process is anything to go by, enshrining expropriation without compensation in the Constitution will effectively remove the possibilities of direct expropriation through community occupations and replace it with long, dragged out legal processes. In addition, this process assumes that courts will always make rulings that are objective and fair; however, formalising expropriation will still not guarantee the complete democratic participation of beneficiaries. On the contrary, since the courts are not devoid of class or class influence, an Expropriation Bill could remain a powerful instrument in the hands of property developers and state privatisation initiatives. It will instead mean more stringent measures against

occupations, what state institutions are already demonising as 'land grabs'. As we have seen, the existence of the Bill of Rights and Chapters 25 and 26 of the Constitution has not benefitted the majority of the people, otherwise we would not be here. In addition, with so much emphasis placed on compensation and the conditions under which land can be expropriated, the Bill is not only an expression of the reluctance of the ANC government to part with its 'willing buyer, willing seller' approach, but comes with the usual contentious and ambiguous character that will be subject to both local and provincial governments' interpretation, and their respective departments' differing means and capacity for implementation. Essentially, the Bill will shift eviction struggles from the occupied land to court appeals of why certain expropriations are unsuccessful i.e. a shift from fighting with law enforcement and anti-land invasion units to fighting against legal representatives and judges.

In conclusion, while at first glance the Expropriation Bill seems progressive and responsive to the needs of the homeless and landless, a closer look reveals the inadequacies of such a bill. It is a bill that is removed from the reason of its introduction, from the conditions that produce the need to occupy land. In addition, this bill cannot be discussed without taking into consideration the context within which the ANC government introduced it. Lastly, it is one thing to sign a bill into law, but it is a completely different ball game to trust a corrupt and corrupted governance system to deliver social justice.

"this process assumes that courts will always make rulings that are objective and fair"

MY STRUGGLE by Dale T. McKinley & Sydney Mosholiba

COVID-19 AND CASUALISED WORKERS: UNDER ATTACK, BUT RESILIENT AND STILL STRUGGLING

ILRIG's Dale T. McKinley (DM) interviews Sydney Mosholiba (SM), organiser for the Simunye Workers Forum and the Casual Workers Advice Office (SWF/CWAO) based in Germiston, Ekurhuleni.

DM: What have been the key impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on SWF/CWAO?

SM: The first one has been massive dismissals of SWF members – where the employers used the (first few months of the) pandemic as an opportunity to lay off workers without reason. The other area ... is that we are no longer able to organise workers as we used to before the pandemic. The number of workers participating in our activities has gone down drastically. We are doing our best to encourage and motivate workers because the workers are scared of this pandemic and they are taking precautions – which we support.

The worst affected places in the first part of the pandemic lockdown last year were coming from those employers who claimed that they were not classified as providing essential services, and thus were 'forced' to lay off workers because they could not operate their companies. Once the (hard) lockdown was over and workers returned to the company, they were told, no you must wait ... we will phone you or send you a sms and communicate with you about returning. That's when we saw many of our members losing their jobs.

Employers also introduced restructuring in the workplace with a view to (supposedly) be complying with health and safety protocols, social distancing etc. Here we are dealing with mostly labour broker workers, workers who do not enjoy the protection that permanent workers do ... so employers retrenched them in the name of (the need for) restructuring.

DM: What have been the other main ways in which workers have been affected by changes in working conditions?

SM: Where we had shift workers in companies where employers are supposed to organise transport for workers to go into a night shift, many of those employers refused to provide transport and also refused to provide safety equipment. As a result, some workers did not feel safe and refused to come to work. That was then seen as an unprotected strike and so some workers were dismissed.

There have been other employers who have said that because of COVID we are not making any profits and we can therefore no longer keep the current headcount ... so we are now going to shorten the hours, where you are going to work two days in and two days out or maybe one week in and one week out. These arrangements were imposed; there was never an attempt to say let's negotiate ... so, many workers lost hours and lost wages as well.

DM: What has been the response of the state (e.g., Department of Labour and the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration)?

SM: Right from the start of the pandemic these institutions have been found wanting. When we approached the DoL and told them that employers are not providing PPE and keeping social distancing in the workplace, the DoL did not come to the party. Even now, that department is a disaster ... in terms of the Temporary Employer/Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) and risk benefits etc. We still have TERS cases that we are fighting.

The CCMA budget cuts made things worse because now we have workers who have issues around TERS, UIF and so on, who are no longer able



SWF and CWAO outside the Benoni CCMA office offering free advice to workers in May 2020*. Photo courtesy of Simunye Workers Forum - SWF Facebook page.

to go to the CCMA and open cases. The CCMA has restricted any walk-in referrals and we do not have the capacity to deal with everything.

DM: Tell us about the SWF/CWAO's 'Open CCMA Campaign'?

SM: Basically, what we are saying is that the CCMA must allow workers – especially the most vulnerable like domestic workers - to go to their offices and open cases free of charge. But because the CCMA has closed (many of) their offices, the internet cafés around the CCMA premises are now making money out of these workers who have to buy referrals (documents), to scan, to email these documents. The CCMA is outsourcing these kind of services.

The CCMA is also cutting the number of part-time commissioners they are using and because there are so many cases caused by this pandemic, we think that the CCMA should reinstate these part-timers and also make them permanent.

DM: Has SWF lost members to Covid?

SM: Yes, we have lost members at companies such as Simba ... and (others) like those that live in informal settlements ... have succumbed to the virus.

DM: We don't talk much about how this pandemic has impacted on workers in their day-to-day lives, including on the mental and emotional side. Can you speak to that?

SM: The working class has been through a lot, psychologically and mentally but because the

working class is resilient and able to adjust to conditions much faster than other classes – e.g., with the HIV-AIDS pandemic – I think that workers will be able to adjust to this pandemic and get on with their lives. The initial shock of the pandemic is beginning to change and SWF workers are beginning to deal with it in a most organised fashion.

DM: What impacts has the pandemic had on working class unity and solidarity?

SM: The pandemic has created opportunities for us, to ... work in solidarity (especially) with communities. So, we are collaborating with all the social movement structures who are doing similar work and from time to time we have Zoom meetings.

For example, with the Open CCMA Campaign we have other advice offices and worker organisations across the country – so it's a collective effort. The pandemic has created solidarity amongst the working class organisations.

DM: Do you think the pandemic has changed labour relations permanently?

SM: From where I am sitting, I don't think the pandemic has changed things for the worse, forever. Workers were attacked under the name of the pandemic (but) the resilience, the will to struggle and the unity workers showed in saying we do not appreciate the undermining of our rights under the pandemic (are important). I don't think the employers can any longer use the pandemic to attack workers.

DM: Where to over the next while for workers in terms of worker organisation, particularly amongst casualised workers?

SM: I am just hoping that organisations like ours will continue to do the work they are doing ... moving into the future it is going to be (crucial for) precarious workers to be organised because ... any type of work that is permanent is going to be exterminated and the future employment culture is one that is going to be casualised.

The traditional unions have given up on the fight ... they only focus on the question of wages, there is no organising. Even when workers are under attack you see those like COSATU are quiet ... workers no longer enjoy the protection they used to from the traditional union organisations. So, organisations like Simunye will continue to do what we can do but the future of the labour market is uncertain. We will need to strengthen the type of work we do and if possible, expand our links to different areas spread across the country.

What is important for working class formations to note is that the capitalist system has failed this country and the type of inequalities we see are devastating. The working class must work together; it doesn't matter which formation it is, whether it is the churches, the stokvels or whoever. Because there is going to be (more) devastation; in the townships, poverty is increasing and people are fighting for small pieces of opportunity. Unless the working class comes together in solidarity and collaboration to focus on these problems and find solutions to this disaster, our country is going to implode.

TO TINA OR NOT TO TINA

by The Botsotso Ensemble

In this short introduction, we set out the context and objectives, as well as a synopsis of the action of the play. We then address the issue of community radio and what we have discovered in our ongoing inter-action with over 25 stations in urban and rural areas across all nine provinces.

To TINA (**There Is No Alternative**) or Not to TINA is a three-part audio drama written and produced by The Botsotso Ensemble in association with ILRIG. It is about the Rojava Revolution, an existing political-economic alternative to the current global neoliberal capitalist system whose political form continues to be the centralised 'nation-state'. The backdrop to the dramatic action is the growing ecological crisis precipitated by global heating and extreme weather patterns.

While casualisation, financialisation and inequality in the global economy have accelerated because of COVID-19, these tendencies had been manifesting since the 2008 crash. In tandem with this general immiseration and insecurity, there has been even greater concentration of wealth (via control of global financial flows and resources) by an oligarchy of billionaire individuals and corporations. They are ably assisted by various local comprador classes who ensure that unemployment, corruption, waste and mismanagement put massive pressure on both the working and middle classes. The total commodification of human life has been achieved with all the expected results of increased alienation, violence and social demoralisation. And then, of course, hanging over all these social crises are the unfolding consequences of global heating and damaged biodiversity which will probably lead to planetary extinction.

With this background of dysfunctionality, scarcity and decadence, one would hope to find coherent, unified political forces that are building their strength and capacity to fight and find alternatives that can resolve these crises. And so it is, that from within the hell of war just such a movement has emerged in the form of the Rojava Revolution in which a previously Kurdish nationalist party has facilitated the emergence of local, democratic and gender-equal governing structures that grant equality and access to all minority groups and religions.

The play provides information and reflection on the capitalist crisis and on the Rojava Revolution through short scenes set in different situations and involving various and often contradicting characters:

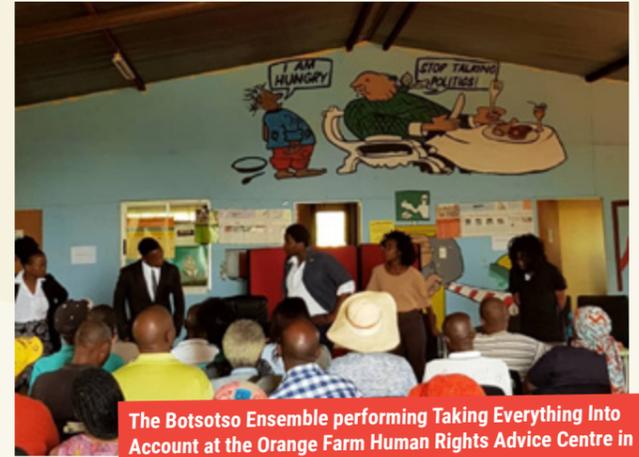
- A mother and son in a South African township who face hunger on a daily basis because the mother has been retrenched – and decide to save themselves by shoplifting.
- A rising black capitalist defends his desire for 'quick bucks' against the doubts of a woman friend.
- A Zimbabwean father and daughter cross the Limpopo River to find work in Mzansi, but once they get to Jozi and are harassed by police, they realise that the only long-lasting solution is to return home and fight the ruling party's oppression.
- A depressed activist seeking relief for his anger and frustration visits a cynical psychologist who believes that 'human nature' is such that **There is No Alternative** to the current dog-eat-dog reality.
- A young woman activist who has returned from Rojava informs them of the reality of the social revolution that has taken place and inspires them to learn about its policies and practices and apply/adapt them to local South African conditions.

The different scenes are inter-woven through the three episodes and show development of the characters and themes, though each episode is relatively self-explanatory and can be considered as a separate piece.

And so, having created the drama, what do ILRIG and Botsotso hope to achieve? Here we come back to our original objective relating to the 'target audience' and to the means/platform used to reach them.

With the COVID-19 pandemic prohibiting live performance indefinitely, the joint ILRIG/Botsotso program of providing civic and other working-class formations with socially engaged live theatre was suspended. In its place, we turned to community radio as the perfect temporary substitute, but also as a long-term opportunity to revive audio drama and use this creative medium to engage with listeners on issues of working-class interest. This engagement would take place during 'post-broadcast' discussions which could assist in building grassroots organisation and lead non-party political campaigns focused on meeting local needs.

However, as we met with more and more stations, and offered them the plays and our assistance in broadcasting them (as tools for supporting transformation and delivery), we found that, like so many other areas with the potential to develop a genuinely 'post-apartheid' South Africa, almost all have been taken over by 'bosses' (as opposed to being run by democratically elected local activists) who pursue personal commercial interests and promote capitalist consciousness. As a result, very few stations report on local needs or have programs



The Botsotso Ensemble performing *Taking Everything Into Account* at the Orange Farm Human Rights Advice Centre in February 2020". Photo courtesy of ILRIG.

that specifically provide local organisations/activists and general listeners with platforms for discussion and planning. The network of community radio stations (there are over 170 such stations that have been licensed by ICASA) has long ceased to be a progressive force that should get maximum co-operation from working class organisations.

We also found that most stations do not create any original content (other than scheduling talk shows), largely play commercial music and try to maximise religious broadcasts because churches pay for airtime. As such, very few followed the broadcast of each episode of the drama with a discussion of the topics raised, and almost none provided us with an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the play. All the stations wanted was payment for broadcasting this free content!

In short, we found a critical resource for working-class consciousness-raising and organisation-building stuck in predictability, mediocrity and irrelevance. As the crisis worsens, the building and defending of mass organisations like *Abahlali baseMjondolo* and other broad-based revolutionary organisations will become a life-and-death issue, and community radio must be revived so as to contribute to this rebirth of liberation politics.

The multi-ethnic peoples of Rojava have since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2012, created their own grassroots democratic collectives that highlight women's liberation from discrimination, domination and abuse, and show in action that real alternatives to neoliberal capitalism exist.

Other audio dramas in the series include: 'Plague in the Time of King Kapital and Queen Corona', 'No Money for Jam' and 'Taking Everything into Account'. All are available as podcasts on the ILRIG website.

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.



CALLING ALL CULTURAL ACTIVISTS

We would love to feature your artwork advocating for alternatives to capitalism, fascism and patriarchy. Please help us make this an inspiring publication by sending us your poetry & songs, photography & graphic design, paintings & drawings, reports & manifestos of cultural activist interventions etc.



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**FROM
COLOMBIA TO PALESTINE**



MAY ALL COLONIZERS FALL