

## UMSEBENZI ONLINE

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### **Easter Friday 2020, Chris Hani 27<sup>th</sup> annual commemoration and the need to defeat novel coronavirus**

Dr Sithembiso Bhengu

Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> April marked 27 years since the callous assassination of Chris Thembisile Hani, our beloved leader of the liberation movement and General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP). This year, the day of Chris Hani commemoration coincided with Easter Friday, the day on which Christians commemorate the crucifixion and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The commemorations were however both limited by the lockdown necessarily required as part of the efforts to stop the spread of the deadly novel coronavirus (Covid-19).

The Covid-19 pandemic is forcing us, perhaps for the first time in a long time, to confront the fact that millions of South Africans live in great uncertainty. Many do not know if their jobs are secure. Others do not know how they will secure their livelihoods. This year, it is important to invoke this connection and to remind ourselves of the real meaning of sacrifices these two leaders made and of societies they lived in and died for. Besides, Chris Hani himself grew as a devout Catholic, even developing his love for literature during his schooling days at a Catholic school. It might perhaps even be that learning about the *Biblical* Jesus, who grew up as a carpenter's son, his ministry with the downtrodden of society and his opposition to religious exploitation by Pharisees were Hani's first roots of consciousness.

### **Chris Hani Legacy in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic**

We are commemorating Chris Hani this month in the midst of the Covid-19 global pandemic that is creating a health crisis, perhaps never seen before, placing the vulnerability of the poor and elderly to the fore and destabilising economies and social life across the world. Globally, the infections now exceed two million, and over 135 000 deaths are attributed to the virus. The infections continue, and more are still dying. The statistics are updated on a daily basis. Lockdowns have been implemented to curb the spread of the virus. Beyond the health crisis, this period signifies a deeper crisis of the global system of capitalist accumulation, bringing into question our fundamental basis of existence as part of the earth cosmology, human relations and how we as humans relate to nature.

In 1991 Chris Hani outlined what socialism meant at a very practical level. Socialism, he said, mean the capacity of human beings to live in harmony with nature and the environment, rather than to destroy the environment in the name of development. Hani understood, then, what other Marxists today call 'eco-socialism'. For him, socialism meant sustainable development that prioritises human wellbeing and equity, while being extremely sensitive to the planet and its resources.

To Hani, development meant providing the most basic services to the people. These include access to clean drinking water and sanitation, provision of quality education, quality health-care for all, productive work and safety for women and children from violence and abuse. This is antithetical to the hegemonic development based on pursuing capitalist economic growth at the expense of the environment, humanity, human dignity and wellbeing. Hani opposed the destructive paradigm that turns human beings and the environment into commodities. Inequality is unprecedented as a result of capitalist accumulation. The richest 1 per cent controls more than 80 per cent of the world's resources and wealth.

Those who are Christians or familiar with the *Bible* would recall that in the book of Matthew, 24, the chapter preceding Jesus' procession to Jerusalem and his crucifixion, he prophesied about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. At that *Biblical* time this was unimaginable. It was met with disbelief by those who heard it. Yet between March and September in 70 Before the Common Era, as was recorded, the second major destruction of Jerusalem occurred, resulting, among others, in the scatter and exile of many inhabitants for generations.

The warning was made at a time when Jerusalem and the entire nation was under the protectorate of Rome, with the national and religious elites as collaborators with the Empire and benefiting by continuing to amass through exploiting their communities through a myriad of religious and national taxes. Hence, the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem was first addressed to religious and political elites. It was to this and other critical statements and actions that they responded with conspiring for Jesus to be prosecuted.

The current global Covid-19 pandemic, similar to the destruction of Jerusalem, has been foretold throughout the last 70 to 80 years, but was largely ignored by the capitalist accumulation regime, including after the bloody Second World War. Warnings on the capitalist accumulation path, its massive exploitation of nature, mutated, roughly from the early 1970s, into neoliberalism and expanded vastly to new global sources of wealth accumulation. By that time, a massive destruction of the environment had occurred, affecting Africa, Asia, in Latin America the Amazon, and almost every part of the world. Regardless, the destruction was intensified, rather than stopped, under neoliberalism. Wars and violence continued across the globe, affecting many people and creating a global system of control comprising core-periphery territories. All these took place with simultaneous quantum leaps of riches and unimaginable wealth accumulated by global capital and its gatekeepers.

The life story of Chris Hani represents the revolutionary spirit of late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century liberation and social emancipation movement against the global capitalist accumulation path and its pervasive influence across the world. Coincidentally, Hani, in one of his last interviews, warned us against the corrupt and corrupting accumulation path and its destructive long-term effect on humanity and freedom. These warnings have been abounding globally, mostly on the environmental impact of the capitalist accumulation path and its global threat, as the main driver of the globalisation project.

In commemorating the life of Chris Hani this year, we must revisit the foundations for his conception of a society he struggled to build. Hani wanted a development path that protects the environment and empowers our people and communities, a development path that eliminates poverty and inequality while taking care of nature. He wanted progress that is not destructive to our environment, but that will leave the earth and her resources for our children's children and generations to come.

Not only is the unleashing of the Covid-19 pandemic a result of global capitalism but it also, and in many ways than anything else, enables us to recognise the fatal flaws of a human existence that creates and accentuates inequalities, poverty and violence experienced across the world. It has also exposed the idiocy of commoditisation of health-care and services in the global north. It simultaneously exposed the fallacy of the 'market driven' economics mantra dominating global finance and economic policy.

Unfortunately, most state and private sector responses globally focus on intervention measures to shelter businesses from the negative effects of the pandemic. In South Africa, we are not an exception with massive resources already committed for businesses with less clarity about the working class, including the unemployment. The irony of the South African economy is that the so-called market has been operating in a context where about a third of the economically active population is not in employment.

The financial stimulus into the economy for business should not be pushed with the false claims that it is meant to protect jobs, because business interests in the South African economy have not been to create jobs but to make profit. In a report on Covid-19, published on Tuesday, 6 April 2020, some economist argued that the South African economy cannot afford an extension of the lockdown, a common epithet by those from business interests, completely oblivious to the humanitarian challenge posed by the pandemic.

This year, more than ever, our commemoration of Chris Hani should be a catalyst for mobilising our people against the disastrous calamity of the system of capitalist accumulation. This commemoration should be the platform to raise the voices of our people even louder against attempts by those who want to hand over our country on a silver platter to the International Monetary Fund/World Bank consortium. These commemorations should raise the awareness and campaign for the fast-tracking of the introduction of the National Health Insurance.

We should use the commemoration to advance an alternative political economy and social development pathway, jettisoning the accumulation path, dealing decisively with corruption in the private and public sector and advocating for a humane understanding of life anchored in social inclusion and circular notion of reinforcing sustainable co-existence between humanity and nature.

This commemoration should also echo more clearly the demand for an official inquest into the assassination of Chris Hani, especially in the light of the continued refusal by his assassins to clear their conscience by exposing others who were probably involved in the assassination. We are literally only three years before commemorating three decades of the death of this leader. The Hani family and many of our people who continue to love the freedom for which he lived and died, should not endure perpetual pain brought about by the deficit of justice. All masterminds, conspirators, passive and active participants who were involved in the assassination of Hani must be exposed through full disclosure of the truth and all the circumstances surrounding the assassination and held to account.

As the Chris Hani Institute we believe that Hani's vision for South Africa is more relevant now more than ever. Long live the spirit of Chris Thembisile Hani Long Live!

- *Dr Sithembiso Bhengu is the Director at the Chris Hani Institute*

## **Novel coronavirus and lessons for the labour movement**

Cde Benson Ngqentsu

There must be major lessons to be learnt by the labour movement in general and non-unionised workers in particular following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) that has ravaged the entire world. The international community has endured not a devastating health crisis, but is facing a dire catastrophe in the collapse of the world economy, on a scale larger than the 2008 financial crisis and the other economic crises that occurred in the previous decades. During these difficult times, in a class divided society it is difficult to imagine a future without violations of workers' rights and job security. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath will intensify the antagonistic relations between the two major opposing classes in society, namely the working class and the capitalist class. As John Bellamy Foster warns us in the interview article titled 'Catastrophe capitalism: climate change, COVID-19, and economic crisis' published on 1 April 2020:

'...the capitalist system has failed. Now, humanity in line with freedom as necessity, will have to move on to the struggle to build a now more sustainable, more egalitarian world, relying on the material means at hand together what is new and creative that we can bring to bear in a more collective order.'

It is therefore important for organised labour and the broader section of the workers to understand the struggle and the storms ahead. Capitalism inherently thrives on the exploitation of labour and maximise its exploitative practices in the face of crisis. Thus, workers must ready themselves for protracted battles in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

Marxists recognise that every crisis presents opportunities. The pertinent question for the workers and the labour movement is what opportunities are presented for them by the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a question that the labour movement must start grappling with here and now... as big business has identified opportunities to slash salaries and without any doubt is preparing plans for *en masse* bloodbath retrenchments in safeguarding of profitability.

The Minister of Employment and Labour assured the nation that no employer may force employees to take unpaid leave during the lockdown. The Director General of the Department of Employment and Labour was further quoted as saying:

‘...if ever there is an opportunity for employers to care for their employees now is that time. We issued guidelines in terms of what workplaces need to do with regards to occupational health and safety. We know that this is a very stressful time for employees because there is a possibility that they may lose income.’

The DG went on to say:

‘...the Department has come up with a benefit that is delinked from the normal UIF (Unemployment Insurance Fund) credit-based system.’

From this pronouncement, it does appear that government is aware of the exploitative nature of capital and that mechanisms have been put in place to protect the workers against any unscrupulous behaviour. This is commendable work indeed.

However, the question remains, how will government enforce these policy pronouncements? This is particularly important for those workers in the countryside, the most vulnerable and super-exploited in the farms and in the hospitality industry located in ranches, game farms and resorts. This problem is compounded by the inspectorate capacity in the department, which could not effectively enforce compliance during normalcy. Without inspectorate capacity, there is no way that the corporate forces will voluntarily comply with these policy pronouncements. The resourcing of the Covid-19 response should have also considered a need to strengthen the inspectorate capacity to ensure accessibility by workers from the countryside.

The department has correctly communicated hotline numbers to report the violation of the regulations, however these are no panacea. Realistically, these are meaningless to the workers in rural areas due to inherent challenges of limited access to information. This is exacerbated by another reality of the proximity of the Offices of the Department of Employment and Labour in rural areas, with some

district offices servicing communities over a 150 kilometres radius. The cessation of union activities during this time of crisis is a breeding ground for super exploitation of these workers and the violation of their rights with impunity. This can go unnoticed.

Many workers across sectors of the economy, particularly in the tourism, retail, hospitality and construction industries are jittering about what tomorrow holds for them. This is particularly a reality that small- and medium-sized enterprises are currently grappling with. This is informed by their lived experiences of daily super-exploitation and their understanding of the aftermath of the Covid-19 responses, not only in South Africa but also internationally.

The workers know that the South African economy has not been untangled the colonial-apartheid features. It is an economy with highly dependent on other economies for finished products. In essence, it is an economy that is not beneficiated, hence its exposure to slow growth, and its inability to resolve the interrelated challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment. Workers are aware that they will be first casualties or negative growth and slow recovery of the economy. It is against this challenge that organised labour and all the Left forces must put their differences aside and start paving a plan for a looming class battle. It is a revolutionary task of all the Left forces to safeguard humanity

The labour movement across all sectors of the economy has been acknowledging that there continues to be a large un-unionised section of workers and recognised the dangers of competing in recruiting the already unionised workers instead of recruiting the un-unionised. The current crisis threatens to intensify this competition as the numbers of workers are expected to dwindle in large volumes. Organised labour must resist such temptations as it will paralyse their much-needed collective voices in the battle line.

It is always important to change attitudes, such as the one held by trade union formation which believes that unionised workers are only those belonging to it. This fallaciously suggests that to be unionised a worker must belong to that trade union formation. The change of attitude that is required in the labour movement also refers to the attitudes of the trade union formations to realise that the ANC-led government is not a ruling class per se but a governing party that operates within the confines of capitalism. This realisation requires sobering up. It requires a rethink in posture to understand that the base of the South African society was anchored in colonial relations, a base that would have never been dismantled by the negotiated settlement we all agreed to. Trade union federations must come with creative ways of bringing the un-organised workers under the fold of collectivism, so as to ensure that these also benefit from the rights brought about by the struggle against colonial-apartheid capitalist exploitation.

Furthermore, the labour movement needs to appreciate that the contradiction between capital and labour requires unity of workers both at a point of production and at societal and political levels as well. This contradiction will sharpen during and in the aftermath of the current health and economic crisis, and organised labour must

not be caught off guard. Trade union organisation is a platform to recruit and organise workers, and then to educate its members to understand the fundamentals of the contradiction between the employer and workers. By educating workers through ideological development but most importantly through concrete struggle for their rights, workers will come to appreciate that the solution to this basic contradiction is socialism.

There is no doubt that fundamental experience, including errors, will be learnt from the current crisis. This will also be a wakeup call for all workers to appreciate the need to subscribe and participate in strengthening trade unions. For their part, trade unions must be agile, flexible and adaptive to the prevailing conditions as well as focused on the strategic goals and class interests of the workers. The labour movement needs to rise above over-reliance on government, particularly on basic workplace matters. Organised labour needs to be at least one step ahead of capital in its planning and action, as the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, Sactwu has demonstrated in the textile and clothing sector of our economy where the union signed a series of lockdown collective agreements.

Taking a wider view, the Covid-19 pandemic has awakened all sectors of society to the complexities and vulnerabilities of life. The trade union movement and its formal organisations must seize the moment and recast itself as the vehicle for working class unity and progress, so that the economy, in what John Bellamy Foster termed 'more collective order', serves the interests of humanity gender and race. This must be underpinned by the principles of collectivism under the direction of the vanguard party of the working class. That work must begin now.

An Injury to One is an Injury to All!

One country!! One Federation!!

One industry!! One Union

- *Benson Ngqentsu is the Provincial Secretary of the SACP in the Western Cape*

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