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Red Alert



Human solidarity and value of life: Statement by SACP General Secretary Dr Blade Nzimande

Unity and principled struggle

It would not be inappropriate to characterise the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) as the most immediate threat to the consolidation and advance of the national democratic revolution, our democratic transition. Covid-19 is indeed a threat that will test our revolution and its resilience on a number of fronts and at different levels. For us to defeat the scourge of the virus need maximum possible unity, in the first instance, within our movement. Most importantly, we need to forge widest possible national unity, perhaps unseen in the recent history of our country, if ever. Unless our movement is itself united, it would be incapable of leading the effort of uniting widest possible sectors of the South African society. The ongoing Alliance engagement is therefore very important.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has played a hugely important role in leading the country in what so far has been one of its most difficult periods since our radical democratic breakthrough of 1994. However, the ability of government to hold the country together must be buttressed by the unity of our movement as a whole. Besides some minor factionalist sniping on social media, there has been an important display of unity in our movement. This, the unity, we have to build upon moving forward and beyond Covid-19.

As the saying goes, every cloud has its silver lining.

Never in the history of the post-1994 South Africa did our government manage to communicate so consistently and directly with our people. The media itself, maybe out of having no other choice, has fairly carried the message in a much more direct manner, with hardly any 'independent' political analysts or opportunistic posturing by sections of the opposition.

Complicating the challenges of the period is that we are now faced with the now deeply interrelated and interlinked challenges of Covid-19 and the economic crisis in Southern Africa. In South Africa the economic crisis that the Covid-19 pandemic found underway took the form of a technical recession in the context of a long period of stagnation and persistently high rates of unemployment, inequality and poverty. Moreover, and as a direct result of economic crisis, Covid-19 found Southern Africa

in a deep crisis of social reproduction – increasing inability of families and whole communities to make ends meet or feed themselves. Some of the worst features and manifestation of social reproduction crisis, like gender-based violence, are being worsened by their perpetrators opportunistically within the framework of the very measures aimed at combating Covid-19, like the current nationwide lockdown in South Africa.

It is also not unthinkable that one of the unintended consequences of the lockdown may be a dramatic increase in incidents of sexual abuse and unplanned, including unwanted, pregnancies. These type indicators might likely worsen, with possibly higher rates of unemployment. In addition, it is true that there will likely be significant differences between the pre- and post-Covid-19, and that is certain aspects what has been an extremely bad socio-economic situation might worsen.

Our approach to the challenges facing our revolution, and especially the role of the SACP, remains as valid, that neither the state capture networks nor a neoliberal regime of measures will solve that we are faced with as a our country. It is clear to us that unless we are absolutely vigilant, the very necessary measures needed for disaster management, might be used for corrupt ends by certain sections of society. This does not only refer to corruption, and within government – but also in the private sector. It includes price gouging by supermarkets and shops. We must not lower our guard in the struggle against corruption.

At the same time, we must mobilise the widest possible sections of the workers and poor of our country to emphatically reject any attempts by those seeking to push neoliberal policies at exploiting this current crisis in order to achieve their ends. Temptations to subvert our policy and democratic national sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or World Bank whatsoever must both be avoided and rejected. If anything, this period requires, in earnest, a second radical phase of our transition characterised by radical structural transformation of or economy with determined state interventions to systematically eliminate stubborn colonial features persistent in our economy. Neoliberal measures can only sink our country further into an economic abyss, as these would seek to place the burden of Covid-19 and the economic crisis on the shoulders of the workers and the poor.

Surely it cannot be that whilst a country like Spain has taken over public hospitals, and in the United Kingdom the state has taken over the train systems, and with the United States having inadequate Covid-19 testing kits as the private sector is failing that country, that in South Africa we can even dream of placing our hope on the capitalist market to rescue us from the interlinked challenges of economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Necessity for human solidarity

As we are facing now an extended lockdown in South Africa and the Covid-19 pandemic across the world, we as people are showing both our good points and our bad points.

A South African woman chose to stay in China, rather than risk contracting virus on the way and bringing it home to a country less well equipped to deal with it than she estimated China to be.

A tourist family visiting this country had to be compelled by a court of law to be tested and quarantined.

Cuban doctors, despite personal anxiety, have travelled across the world in an act of solidarity with the Italian people.

Health workers continue to risk exposure to covid-19 to save the lives of others.

Some employers are not providing personal protective equipment to their workers. Others are forcing workers to use their leave days, while some are fraudulently claiming to be providing essential services in order to continue to generating profit for self-enrichment.

The disregard on Day Zero of the lockdown by many taverns, the middle class enthusiasm for dog walking and jogging despite the need for the nationwide lockdown, the mass exit to provinces on crowded public transport, the extent of some people approaching the lockdown as a joke that does not affect them, and the disregard of the confinement to our homes will ultimately kill many people if these behaviours continue and prevent us from flattening the curve.

As we start the third week of the lockdown, we already have 25 deaths attributed to Covid-19. Our numbers of confirmed infected people have just exceeded 2 100. As the Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize has explained, these figures will more likely continue to increase, but we must flatten the rate at which they are increasing.

Fighting a pandemic, like fighting against devastating floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, requires a number of layers of solidarity – at inter-country level, at government and social partner level, and down to person to person solidarity. The SACP calls on all of us, no matter how difficult this time could be, to find our ways of acting in solidarity with others and against Covid-19.

Every act to comply with the lockdown regulations, much as they are difficult and feel extreme, is in itself an act of solidarity. In a state of national disaster, laws, policies, and regulations are designed by experts to provide for the maximum good to the maximum number of people under difficult conditions. This involves each of us not being allowed to do things that we like to do.

The directions and regulations that have been issued are hard on all of us, necessary as they are in the fight against Covid-19. But they pose particular and almost unbearable challenges to people living in working class human settlements. The requirements to wash hands with soap and water, to keep physical ('social') distancing, to buy essential groceries as infrequently as possible, have brought to the fore the gross inequality in living conditions between the wealthy and the working class in our country.

The SACP calls on the working people of this country, the workers and the urban and rural poor, to approach the difficult conditions with all of the *ubuntu/botho* and humanity that our cultures give us. Government is putting in place emergency steps to redress some of these challenges. We all feel that this may be too little too late. But at this time, we need to meet each other in a spirit of collaboration and survival.

Ubuntu is under an extreme test in this lockdown period. It is a time in which we as individuals, as families, as communities, as workplaces, and as a nation, will learn about our choices in life and their consequences. Now is the time in which we show our true colours and our character as South Africans. Can we come out of lockdown with the ability as people and nation to be responsible, law abiding, socially conscious, and driven by solidarity?

In order to address the inequality that makes this pandemic so dangerous for working class families and communities, who face this in crowded shacks and houses, without running water, without the money to buy food to cover the 21 days, we will need a real national effort to build the kind of society that our fore-parents shaped for us in the Freedom Charter.

We have a rich history of ordinary people mobilising in response to the calls of ANC exile and underground leadership. Now is a time for the manner in which we as ordinary South Africans heeded the clarion calls of our leadership during the liberation struggle must be re-established in our families, our communities, our organisations, our nation.

Let us remind ourselves that we are engaged in a national democratic revolution, an ongoing process of struggle, transformation and development. At all times our actions and attitudes should be informed by what is necessary to remove the inequality that is so prevalent in every aspect of societal life, and to put in place economic and social and political systems and measures that promote the quality of life and quality of contribution of the majority of our people. The democratic transition requires every person to buy into making a contribution and possibly sacrifice for equality and quality of life for the majority. This call should be made a thousand times louder and stronger in this time of the devastating Covid-19 pandemic.

Comrades and friends, the Covid-19 pandemic will be defeated and defeated more effectively and more speedily if we as individuals rise to the expectations of necessary social activism and comply with what is required of us. After the Covid-19 pandemic has been brought under control, the infection rate slowed down, we will need to refocus the priorities of the national democratic revolution on addressing inequality and lack of access to essential social services and adequate planning and human settlement infrastructure.

We will need to increase the pace of democratic transformation to wipe out the excluding and marginalising structures, relations and systems. Interventions adopted now should actually lay the basis for a rapid advance of this transformation process. The post-Covid-19 society must be characterised by the strongest sense of social justice. This is what it means to be human and a citizen of a nation, Southern African region, a continent and a planet.

- *Cde Blade Nzimande is SACP General Secretary and issued this statement on behalf of the Party. The statement was first published by Umsebenzi Online, Vol. 19, No. 11, 13 April 2020.*
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Challenges of protecting informal economy workers in time of novel coronavirus

Cde Pat Horn

Workers in the informal economy in South Africa, in agriculture and the restaurant sector, domestic work, waste reclaiming in the streets and on landfill sites, street and market traders, home based craft and garment work, community care work, the taxi sector, and artisanal fishing, number just under 5 million workers. This is according to the Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey, and it compares to 10.8 million formally employed workers. They are 29.5 per cent of working South Africans.ⁱ

Some informal workers have employers, but are informally employed by virtue of not being registered for the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases (COID) or any other employment related social security schemes. The rest of informal workers are self-employed, numbering 1 774 million people. Their work is seriously impacted by the crisis. They have nothing to fall back on. They provide services to communities, some of which, like collection of recyclables, create huge savings for municipalities. But none of the statements from the Department of Employment and Labour Department have addressed the fall-out they are currently experiencing.

Almost all informal workers live day-by-day on their very small incomes. When the bottom falls out of their work, they and their families will starve.

As early as 20 March 2020, they called on government to make urgent arrangements to redirect funds and establish a Living Cash Grant to all informal workers. This would enable vulnerable informal workers to comply with calls to self-isolate where feasible, without losing their livelihoods, and go on to survive the worse times to come.

In the meantime, those who have no option but to continue to earn their livelihoods, called on the different tiers of government to help make their work safer with the following urgent interventions.

1. the mass provision of protective masks and gloves to all informal workers, especially those working with members of the public, organic and waste materials, and where cash exchanges hands;
2. the mass provision of water, soap and sanitizers in public spaces.

In their pre-lockdown statement, organised informal workers pleaded: 'Our voices must be heard in finding solutions to the current Covid-19 crisis, but also in finding lasting solutions to the long term crisis of poverty, inequality and unemployment. Now is the time for worker and community solidarity, the likes of which we have never seen before.'

Since the introduction of the lockdown, the closure of *spaza* shops, street markets and street food vendors has created a situation where millions of South Africans cannot get easy and safe access to purchasing food. It has also put enormous, and in most cases chaotic and unsafe pressure, on township supermarkets.ⁱⁱ The list of

essential services includes *spaza* shops, but despite a Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) press release on 26 March 2020 to the effect that *spaza* shops (tuck shops) will not have to register through *bizportal.gov.za*, this has not been communicated to security personnel. The list of essential services in any event falls short in that it does not include street and market vendors selling food, in particular fresh food.

On 30 March 2020, the Women In Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WIEGO) appealed to the DTI to consider revising the list of essential service retail outlets to include informal food retailers – street traders, street markets and *spaza* shops – regardless of whether they are registered or nationality. Research has consistently shown their critical role in food security.

Civil society organisations have mobilised into networks to raise awareness in communities about Covid-19 and measures needed to flatten its curve. They are attempting to impress on the authorities the importance of addressing the social and economic needs of the most vulnerable sectors of communities including informal workers. They also impressing on community members the critical need for complying with lockdown measures, combined with raising awareness.

The Tshisimani Centre for Activist Educationⁱⁱⁱ in Cape Town has mobilised civil society organisations and social movements nationwide to co-ordinate public health, political and social demands and action through online platforms. The South African National AIDS Council^{iv}, a national body consisting of 18 sectors of civil society working on health issues, has joined forces with the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) Community Constituency to strengthen civil society co-ordination and establish a Civil Society Command Centre^v to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 and advance public health measures to protect communities.

The Nedlac Community Constituency participates in a Covid-19 Three-a-Side Rapid Response Task Team. They have been consistently raising the issues of basic income grants for workers in the informal economy, and following up the appeal to the DTI to revise the list of essential service retail outlets to include informal food retailers. But ‘the main issue that Community Constituency has repeatedly raised, namely income security for informal workers and the unemployed’^{vi} keeps on slipping off the agenda.

Compounding these challenges are the mixed messages organised worker and community groups are getting from some government officials. The Department of Social Development is not engaging with the issue of informal workers. Treasury seems to fear that temporary relief measures will create irreversible social benefits. The Department of Employment and Labour is concerned mainly about employees who are covered by the UIF. The Minister of Transport is talking to taxi industry associations about their loss of business, but nothing about lost of income support for the taxi drivers and conductors – that is, for the workers in the sector.

The Department of Small Businesses appears incapable of comprehending that their preconditions for relief measures are impossible for workers in the informal economy to comply with when they are free to run from pillar to post – and even more so under lockdown conditions. Informal traders were asked to redo their qualifying

information template so many times that they had to eventually give up because the print shops are simply not open any more.

- *Cde Pat Horn is an SACP Central Committee member. She an activist in the informal sector and serves an advisor at Streetnet (street.net.org.za) and writes in this capacity.*

ⁱ From statement from the following informal worker organizations: SAWPA, ARO, SADSAWU, SAITA, JITP, SAPTWU, KZN Fisherpeople's Forum, KZN Community Health Workers, issued by WIEGO on 20 March 2020

ⁱⁱ Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (2020) 'Food in the time of the Coronavirus: Why we should be very, very afraid'. Website link: <https://www.plaas.org.za/food-in-the-time-of-the-coronavirus-why-we-should-be-very-very-afraid/>

ⁱⁱⁱ tshisimani.org.za

^{iv} sanac.org.za

^v communityconstituency.org.za

^{vi} Email communication between Community Constituency and Nedlac Secretariat

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