

Zwelinzima Vavi's address to the memorial of Mthuthuzeli Tom 18 December 2013

Thank you for inviting me. I know many of you do not want me to even acknowledge that I am compelled to make my public input as an individual activist who knows Mthuthuzeli Tom rather than as the General Secretary of COSATU. By the way I have not received any charges – it was interesting to read here what charges I will face in your congress reports.

Firstly revolutionary greetings to Mthuthuzeli Tom's wife Ntombikayise and two children, Mkhonto weSizwe and Amahle. Revolutionary greetings to the NOBs, CEC, delegates to this august gathering and all your esteemed guests.

Born: 7 September 1959, Mpongo, East London, Eastern Cape, Mthura as he was affectionally called died on the 27 August 2010, following a long battle with cancer. Many of you were in East London, Eastern Cape, to bid him farewell on the 04 September 2010.

Mthura was a President of metal workers for many years. He was an embodiment of the Alliance. Comrade Tom was born into the trade union family, the son of a SAAWU activist. He started attending union meetings when he was still at school. It is not surprising that he joined the union on his first day in his first job - as a welder at Mercedes-Benz in 1983 and became a shop steward almost as soon as he started work.

Simultaneously he was a member of the East London Youth Congress, an affiliate of the United Democratic Front (UDF). He was a representative of NAAWU in talks that led to the establishment of COSATU in December 1985.

Mr Campaigns as he was fondly known, Comrade Tom was a tireless fighter for the rights of the workers. He was a strong believer in solid organization. I remember very vividly how excited he was about the COSATU 1997 September Commission Report that talked of building the engines of the Federation.

I have no doubt that he would be thrilled to know that his fighting militant movement he used to fondly call intsimbi ayigobi has grown to **338718**. NUMSA has become the biggest ever union in South Africa and certainly the biggest paid up union in the African continent. He would be extremely happy to witness the current levels of unity and cohesion of his union. He would be happy that you are still one of the leading unions when it comes to practicing the best traditions of democratic trade unionism in our country. Mthura would be happy about your steadfast adherence to the principle of worker control, vibrant internal discussions, militancy and willingness to fight for your members as demonstrated over and over since your inception. He would be happy that NUMSA has not been swallowed by the politics of the day at the expense of the bread and butter issues of its member. He would be happy that you have kept that balance well. Your union knows why the trade union was created and what its primary goal is - to be a spear in the hands of workers to fight for improved wages and working conditions. A union that abandons that in favour of big political rhetoric and debates has no future. As you gather at this special congress, Mthura would urge you to continue to do what you have done but he would demand that you

should do that even better – service members, close the social gap between leaders and the rank and file, equip shop stewards and staff with knowledge needed to fight today’s battles, link up with other sister unions on the home front and abroad, train the leaders to lead even more effectively, and build the union structures at all levels. In particular he would plead that we build vibrant democratic workplace organization capable of keeping the shop stewards and the union leadership on its toes.

Mthura would argue you to continue embracing the principles of COSATU notwithstanding the difficulties of today, but non racialism, worker control, paid up membership, one union one industry and international worker solidarity.

Broadly Mthura would be extremely concerned about the state of the trade union movement. He would be concerned about the possibilities of history repeating itself. He was part of the generation that took the baton from the 1973 brigade that led the Durban strikes – a process that swept the through the country like a tsunami, leading to the collapse of the TUSCA unions. In emphasizing the need to build a strong organization rooted in its members’ interests, he would be worried that COSATU risks becoming the TUSCA of today, with leaders too compromised by narrow interests and doing everything to defend the status quo even when members do not stand to benefit.

He would be shocked at how leaders have abandoned the interests of members to pursue anyone threatening their narrow interests – interests that can be best served if the status quo is maintained. He would be ashamed to note that new unions are emerging all over, created by workers who feel abandoned and who are demanding more accountability. He would be worried that some workers have turned their backs on unions altogether, and are taking their own initiative to represent themselves, leading to massive instability in many workplaces.

Looking at this, Mthura would be reminded of the September Commission which he championed. I want to remind you again of the three scenarios that were identified by the Commission. They were as follows:

Uncertainty	1. The desert	2.Skorokoro	3.Pap, vleis & gravy
Economic development	Stagnation	Modest growth	Massive growth
Vision of ANC	Conservative	Zigzagging	Social democratic
Labour market	Job loss, unemployment	Two tier	Job growth, wide range of jobs and workplaces

Social values	Class struggle	Social fragmentation, ethnicity	A people's rainbow nation
Employers	Weak and aggressive	Strong, culture of enrichment	Strong, innovative, committed to partnership
Workers	Losing jobs but militant	Divided by ethnicity and conditions	Many jobs, but different skills, conditions & wages
Socialism	Revolution or election of workers' party	Not clear	Democratisation & reform

I am sure if the September Commission was to be reconstituted it would add to the Desert and Skoroskoro scenarios something we always underestimate – patronage, corruption, and the invasion of the movement by capitalist values, leading to careerism and the adoption of a dog eats dog/survival of the fittest mentality, the killing of the whistle blowers, and purging of those hesitant to join in the feeding trough. It is these foreign cultures that have been leading to divisions in all the forces that were standing united at the point of liberation. Mthura would be extremely worried about these developments.

Comrades and friends

We are living in the most complex political time as we head towards the celebration of the 20th anniversary of our freedom. Our revolution is at the cross roads. Let us be reminded of the undying words of Marx who said: *“People cannot be liberated as long as they are unable to obtain food and drink, housing and clothing in adequate quality and quantity”*. Engels took this further to affirm that *“Democracy would be quite useless to the proletariat if it were not immediately utilised as a means of accomplishing further measures directly attacking private ownership and securing the existence of the proletariat....”*

In recent times we have been quoting that African intellectual giant, Amilcar Cabral, whose warning to all national liberation movements stands out for me and would be reduced to a song and poems if we were still strong on culture as the liberation movement. He warned that *“Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children.”*¹

Another African intellectual giant Franz Fanon takes this further and warns that *“The... unemployed man [and woman] who never find employment do not manage, in spite of*

¹ Amilcar Cabral, Tell no Lies, Claim No Easy Victories, 1965.

public holidays and flags, new and brightly-coloured though they may be, to convince themselves that anything has really changed in their lives. The bourgeoisie who are in power vainly increase the number of processions; the masses have no illusions. They are hungry; and the police officers, though now they are Africans, do not serve to reassure them particularly. The masses begin to sulk; they turn away from this nation in which they have been given no place and begin to lose interest in it.”²

As we were celebrating and mourning the life of our international icon, Nelson Mandela we witnessed something unheard of, the booing of the President of South Africa and the deafening ululating in salute of the symbol of imperialism, Barack Obama. We have condemned this booing as completely unbecoming of mourning, especially for our beloved Madiba. We must however ask ourselves serious questions about this development. Are the masses beginning to sulk and turn away from this nation? Are they beginning to lose interest in it?

The answer to all these questions lies in a discussion paper we published in June 2006—*Possibilities for fundamental social change*. Let us quote this paper more extensively.

“The NDR is about thoroughgoing radical transformation of social and property relations. There have been numerous warnings against the danger of superficial change. Put another way, there is a danger of simply replacing a white ruling oligarchy with a black one, leaving the social and property relations essentially unchanged. The ANC’s 1969 Morogoro Strategic Perspective in particular was scathing on this as an acceptable outcome for our NDR.

The paper went further to ask a question that we must ask again at this juncture:

*“How do we explain this contradictory socio-economic reality and what are the strategic implications for the democratic movement in general and the labour movement in particular? These are troubling questions as they sharply raise another vexing question: **Has democracy failed workers and the poor? Have we reached a tipping point where the post-apartheid state could be defined as one that acts on behalf of the affluent in our society?** How do we account for the sharp differences in perspectives about the economy and our society within the Alliance, as if we were coming from different planets? What is the weight of the working class politically in South Africa, and how has this allowed for the apparent pro-capitalist bias? What steps do we need to take to assert working class power that is proactive in determining a readjustment of resources in our society? Finally, what is the value of our democracy to the working class?”*

Let us repeat these questions, because they are fundamental to answering the questions on the state of our revolution:

Has democracy failed workers and the poor? Have we reached a tipping point where the post-apartheid state could be defined as one that acts on behalf of the affluent in our society?

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I am sure these questions will preoccupy your thoughts in all the commissions of the congress.

As I was writing this speech, a song that I like played yesterday, the song by a group called "*Bumbana*" which asks a fundamental question – "*ulinde ntoni*".

We have always used the conditions of workers to influence our political posture. What are these conditions telling us today?

The triple crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequalities!

It is true that since the dawn of democracy workers enjoy a range of constitutional guarantees such as the right to fair labour practice, to form and join unions, strike and picket, and the right to collective bargaining.

It is also true that today there are more people with access to electricity, sanitation services, housing and other social needs than was the case before 1994. Despite problems with the quality of services and two-tier education system we must acknowledge that the scale of access to education is a far cry from pre-1994 levels. The state's provision of social security to well over 15 million people has rescued many families from absolute deprivation and abject poverty. These are strides and marks of progress we must celebrate, as they are products of our strife and determination.

But Comrades we have to be more frank in declaring that democracy has so far benefitted the previous ruling classes more than it has benefitted the primary motive forces of the liberation struggle.

Let me remind you of some of the indicators of this skewed situation: -

- In 1995 youth unemployment stood at 38%. In ten years it grew to 45% in 2005.
- In 1995 the overall unemployment rate was 31%. It now sits at 37%, with youth unemployment at 55%. In Sada where I come, the overall unemployment rate is around 60%.
- Increasingly what jobs exist, are becoming casualised, outsourced, sub contracted, and made part-time. This is while profit margins soar. It is no coincidence that while Shoprite Checker's controlling shareholder and board chairperson Christo Wiese is the wealthiest person in SA, and the company's CEO Whitey Basson is the highest earner (R627m in the past financial year), 60% of the company's workforce are variable time workers or casuals.
- The national incomes gap, as measured by the Gini coefficient, has grown since 1995. The Gini coefficient is a measure from 0 to 1, with zero indicating total equality. We now have the dubious honour of being the second most unequal society in the world, beaten only marginally by our neighbour Namibia. We now have a Gini coefficient of 0.63. We knocked Brazil out of the picture a few years back. In contrast to us, Brazil has adopted deliberate poverty and inequality reducing strategies –

some of which formed the basis of our call for radical economic interventions in the 11th COSATU Congress.

- To translate the levels of inequality to practical figures, consider this: Each of the 20 highest paid directors in JSE-listed companies earn 1728 times the average income of a South African worker! These top directors earn on average R5 million a month, while HALF of all employed South Africans earn less than R3500 a month. And the private sector is not the only culprit. Massive increases in the salaries of CEOs of our state owned enterprises means that they now earn over 300 times more than the average worker.
- The United National Human Development Report of 2013 states that 22.2% of our population is vulnerable to poverty and that 14% of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day.
- The Freedom Charter is clear that in a democratic South Africa, no one shall go hungry. Almost 20 years into democracy, about 5.3 million South Africans suffer from hunger and some 9.2 million South Africans have inadequate food on a daily basis.

In the last election campaign we committed ourselves to the concept of Decent Work. We supported the ANC leadership collective and campaigned for the ANC since 1994 because of the commitments each of the comrades made to the working class through various elections manifestos. The 2009 elections were fought based on a commitment to Decent Work, Education, Health, Rural Development and fighting crime and corruption.

The question we must now answer is, so what happened? The worldwide economic crisis that hit us in 2008 does not offer all the answers to this unfolding catastrophe. The answer lies in the continuation of inappropriate neoliberal policies notwithstanding the 52nd ANC policy package that promised that all policies will centre around the need to create decent jobs as the deliberate policy choice to attack poverty and inequalities.

It is obvious that the post-Polokwane administration has spectacularly failed to reverse the crisis of unemployment. It is also obvious that this administration has failed to deliver on one of the basic promises of the 52nd Conference of the ANC, which was to *create decent work*. These failures have occurred within the context where COSATU proposals have been ignored and the Alliance is practically dysfunctional. This administration has also failed to make decent work the primary focus of macroeconomic policy, and continues with the hymn of neoliberal inflation targeting, dismantling of exchange controls and a hands-off approach to the macro-economy, especially the financial system.

The difficulty in dealing decisively with these obvious aspects of poverty lies in the fact that the underlying colonial and capitalist power relations in the economy have not been transformed. As the RDP stated: "*Poverty is the single greatest burden of South Africa's people, and is the direct result of the apartheid system and the grossly skewed nature of business and industrial development which accompanied it*". Business is still grossly skewed, industrial development has regressed and the overall patterns of apartheid

underdevelopment remain entrenched. It is no wonder that there is little progress in realising the demands of the Freedom Charter.

Agricultural land-ownership also remains concentrated and colonial. Estimates are that Black people own between 13-16% of agricultural land in South Africa. Only 10% of the 30% land earmarked for land restitution has been transferred to black farmers, the target date for the 30% is 2014. To make matters worse, it is estimated that more than 70% of redistributed land became unproductive after the reform process, due to the absence of post redistribution support.

It is no wonder that South Africa is failing to even get out of racism, as the ANC Morogoro Strategy and Tactics maintains: *“To allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the root of racial supremacy and does not represent even the shadow of liberation”*.

Whilst this is the situation facing the working class and the poor there is rampant growth of corruption has made all the above problems even worse.

We have described corruption as a programme of the elite in society to steal from the poor. Corruption has become endemic in South Africa. It has become a matter of life and death, literally and metaphorically. In parts of South Africa today, people are being intimidated or even killed for exposing and preventing corruption. Corruption is a threat to a better life for all.

The flood of corruption scandals and the spread of the culture of greed and self-enrichment are threatening to unravel the fabric of society and to undermine all the great progress we have made.

We face the nightmare future of a South Africa up for auction to the highest bidder - a society where no one will be able to do business with the state without going through corrupt gatekeepers. Factions are increasingly formed not around different ideologies or political views, but around access to government power that brings leaders closer to state tenders.

Honest and talented individuals who cannot play this dirty game of ‘survival of the fittest’ will increasingly get sidelined, as slate politics imposes the worst, inefficient and corrupt individuals on us. Mediocrity and chaos will surely be the result if we do not stop the rot while we can.

As you were preparing for this congress the Public Protector issued two damning reports: one on the former Minister of Communications and the other one on the Minister of Agriculture. We are aware of a third report that will be released in January. While we are not yet aware of her recommendations, there is no dispute over the fact that well over R200 million was spent on upgrading the security features of the President’s private residential home. Last year we learnt that some R65 million were spent on security upgrades of Ministers homes in Cape Town with R15 million spent on the Minister of Rural Development.

How could anyone keep quiet when these grotesque amounts of money are spent on individuals whilst so many continue to live in poverty? Let me go back to the 2006 discussion paper question: **Has democracy failed workers and the poor? Have we reached a tipping point where the post-apartheid state could be defined as one that acts on behalf of the affluent in our society?**

This 'me first' and 'to hell with the majority and their poverty and unemployment' mentality, combined with neo-liberalism, has sentenced millions to perpetual inequality in income, inferior education, health, and basic services.

Mthuthuzeli Tom will urge NUMSA must play a leading role in ensuring that South Africa does not end up like any other predator state with the laws of the jungle applying.

The Alliance at a Cross Roads

Comrades and friends,

The status quo in the Alliance is not politically sustainable. We need the ANC to move into a new direction, which the ANC calls an uninterrupted struggle to build a truly united, democratic, non-racial, non sexist and prosperous South Africa.

There is an urgent need for a radical shift to the left, on to a path to economic and social emancipation for the poor majority who have not benefitted economically from the first 19 years of our freedom.

The ANC has committed many class travesties and ideological errors in the past 19 years. There is absolutely no evil in the argument that the ANC must change course and demonstrate its commitment to radical economic transformation and to reverse the legacy of apartheid oppression and Colonialism of a Special Type.

Unless drastic changes are effected, the liberation movement runs the risk of falling out of favour with the majority of the working class.

It would be naive of us to think that a National Liberation Movement that presides over neoliberal capitalism will always enjoy the confidence of the very same people who are at the receiving end of the destructive impacts of neoliberal capitalism!

The biggest challenge facing the ANC and the rest of the democratic forces is not a lack of ideas but our failure to implement what has been agreed to and to have the political will to implement what we know is politically and morally correct.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves: what are the class origins and causes for the lack of political will to drive the agreed upon revolutionary programmes of the liberation movement?

What is the real price of the social distance we have pointed out between the leadership and the masses?

Has the movement been wholly transformed into a weapon to fight palace politics unable to

implement agreed revolutionary pro-working class and pro-poor programmes?

A question that was fiercely debated in the 11th National Congress of COSATU still haunts us today: what is it that we as communists and a revolutionary trade union movement should do to keep the ANC united and focused on a revolutionary programme of action in favour of the working class and the poor?

The trade union movement and genuine communists must state upfront that:

- We refuse to unify with poverty, inequality and unemployment!
- We refuse to make peace with the collective enslavement of the working class by right wing policies!
- We refuse to sign a pact of unity with exploitation and oppression!
- We will not commit to the type of unity that turns a blind eye to the crimes of white monopoly capital and the crisis that imperialism has plunged the world into!
- We are not going to become bedfellows with an agenda that seeks to break the back of working class organisations by suppressing those that offer a radical critique of South Africa's accumulation regime!

Yes, the unity of the Alliance is paramount but this unity must be based on principles and a radical programme. To us, that programme is the Freedom Charter! Nothing else will suffice! Furthermore there has to be a serious commitment to regular meetings with practical agendas, and a commitment to processes of implementation. We cannot afford to reach agreements like was the case in the 2013 Alliance Summit, only for those agreements to be ignored. The youth wage subsidy is a particular case in point.

A revolutionary ANC that consistently pursues the goals of the National Democratic Revolution as captured in the Freedom Charter has the greatest potential to unite all motive forces of our revolution. However, this leadership mantle is not God given - it must be earned in the theatre of struggle. As we have said before, leadership is not declared but earned! Above all the Alliance is not a religion! The Alliance is the coming together of independent organizations to drive transformation. Regrettably the Alliance has never functioned like that for the past 19 years. Mthura would have been the first to ask a fundamental question if this is the case - what must be done?

Unify us, don't divide us!

Lastly, I must express shock that someone in the SACP was allowed to pen a divisive letter to the delegates of this Special National Congress. I don't know who wrote that letter. It represents one of the most unfortunate incidents in the history of the SACP as the vanguard of the working class.

The letter seeks to isolate the NUMSA General Secretary in particular and the NOBs collective in general. It spews slanderous allegations, which are nothing, but an attempt to launch a character assassination against a leader elected by the workers.

Most worryingly and grudgingly it seeks to sing praises for me whilst demonising the NUMSA General Secretary in a deliberate attempt to drive a wedge between comrades.

How much more helpful it would have been if the open letter had been a call for unity around key issues facing the working class of South Africa as a consequence of neo liberal economic policies.

Let us shout from everywhere in our factories louder so that they can all hear – Unity in Action against poverty, inequality and unemployment. Hands Off Irvin Jim, Hands Off NUMSA NOBs, Hands Off NUMSA and Hands Off COSATU.

Long live the memory of Mthuthuzeli Tom. Amandla Ngawethu!