

**Speech by COSATU General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, to the Daily
Maverick's *Gathering on 20 years of Democracy in South Africa, 10 April 2014,*
Gold Reef City, Johannesburg**

Thank you for inviting me to address you as we prepare to celebrate this important national milestone – 20 years since the overthrow of apartheid and the establishment of a constitutional democracy – and our elections on 7 May 2014.

I guess you invited me as one of the worker leaders to speak honestly about democracy and state of the working class 20 years into our celebrated democracy. In doing so I will measure our progress against our ideals and ambitions as the primary motive forces of the revolution.

Our national democratic revolution refers to the change we sought throughout the colonial and apartheid era to defeat oppression and exploitation and replace it with a new South Africa that will be democratic, united, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous. : *“the NDR has as its primary task the defeat of three interrelated and antagonistic contradictions of national oppression, exploitation and gender triple oppression. In simple terms, black people’s oppression was not only based on their colour, but was equally a function of the inherent exploitation of a special colonial capitalist system.*

“African women faced triple oppression in their homes, in society and in the workplace. The NDR therefore seeks to resolve the marginalisation of women, especially Black and African women in particular. In that sense it aims to reconstruct the relationship between men and women on a more equal basis in the household and in the public sphere. Central to the programme of the alliance is building a more egalitarian society, where the gap between the various strata in society is not wide as is currently, a situation the movement inherited from the apartheid system.

“The Freedom Charter is a vision to reconfigure society on a more equal basis, and this requires radical changes in society. The Charter envisioned a politically and economically inclusive society for all. We cannot be content with the transfer of political power from the minority to the majority. State and mass political power must be used to advance the social and economic transformation of our society.

Having said this let me again the ANC 1969 strategy and tactics documents whose words remain an inspiration to me this day. The ANC said:

“Our nationalism must not be confused with chauvinism or narrow nationalism of a previous epoch. It must not be confused with the classical drive by an elitist group among the oppressed people to gain ascendancy so that they can replace the oppressor in the exploitation of the mass ... In our country – more than in any other part of the oppressed world – it is inconceivable for liberation to have meaning

without a return of the wealth of the land to the people as a whole. It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy. 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”

Most of the divisions in the peoples camp I admit have not been caused by ideological or political differences as we have said over and over. The strife is caused by attempts of various factions to push each other away from the dinner table. Having said that we must point out that some divisions are caused by our different reading of the twenty years of the democratic breakthrough. They are around the question: can we say without any fear of a contradiction that we have not allowed “*the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact*”? A debate on this historic goal of the NDR is what has led to divisions in this period.

Amilcar Cabral, one of the most respected African revolutionaries, reminded all national liberation movements that we must “*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

We should all take Franz Fanon’s warning seriously, that “*The... unemployed man [and woman] who never find employment do not manage, in spite of 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

Our biggest task as we celebrate 20 years of democracy is to ensure that what Frantz Fanon said does not begin to make sense to the poor. We must not be oblivious to the reality that the poor continue read and see that the NDR continues to produce billionaires and wealthy capitalists, whilst the poor people still live in squalor. Only the genuine improvement of their material conditions will determine whether they will continue to vest their confidence in our movement going forward. This is what is truly behind the divisions.

The task of a revolutionary trade union federation is to expose and isolate elements that seek to enrich themselves from the labour and hardships of the people. We

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

²

must never be caught in the trap of allowing personal friendships and family relationships to stand in the way of taking up principled battles against corruption and patronage in our organisations.

As a trade union federation that believes in the inevitability of socialism, and as communists we must never be threatened into silence when we see the triumph of individualism and selfishness amongst the leadership and membership of our formations. It is time to reinstate the centrality of the organisation and not the individuals.

Liu Shaoqi of the Communist Party of China taught us a valuable lesson when he said that *“Some people habitually place their personal interests above those of the Party when it comes to practical matters; they are preoccupied with personal gain and loss and always calculate in terms of personal interests; they abuse the public trust, turning their Party work to private advantage of one kind or another; or they attack comrades they dislike and wreak private vengeance, on high-sounding pretexts of principle or Party interests.”*

This quote is extremely relevant to us today, when it is increasingly becoming normal to shout from the roof tops when those we consider our enemies are found with their hands in the cookie jar, and yet to bury our heads in the sand when those politically close to us or whom we perceive as critical players in our political game-plans misuse the public purse for their personal business, and spit in the faces of the millions of people who vote for the ANC out of the hope and trust that we will lead them out of their misery and destitution.

Communists always desist from trailing individuals. They refuse to become prisoners to personal loyalties but are always willing to become willing slaves of the only revolutionary class in our society – the working class!

Let's be reminded of the essence of our revolution:

“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 Freedom Charter’s economic vision, taken forward in the RDP, offers a radical programme for changing social and economic relations. With the adoption of GEAR (and now economic vision of the NDP,) this vision of economic transformation has not been taken forward. Economic reforms largely concentrate on making the economy internationally competitive.

Having said this, let us again remind ourselves of the conclusions made by both COSATU and the SACP together with many other progressive civil society formations: that in economic terms the first decade of democracy have benefited more white monopoly capital than workers.

We can say again that our attempts to make the second decade a decade for the working class in economic terms dismally failed. So without any fear I can declare that the second decade just like the first decade have seen capital disproportionately benefiting from our freedom.

Having said this lets again state that it is surely beyond argument that life for virtually all South Africans has improved in those 20 years. Before we look at what we have achieved let us remember just how evil colonialism and apartheid were.

Colonialism stole the country's wealth, exploited our natural riches and the cheap labour of migrant workers, in order to develop an economy that served to maximize the profits of big multinational monopoly companies in the colonial countries.

Apartheid denied the majority of South Africans all basic human and democratic rights, in particular the right to vote. It forced them to live and work where the government ordered, barred them from all the better paid jobs and even told them who they could or could not marry.

Now we have a democratic constitution and laws which guarantee human rights and freedoms. We can vote, join any party and protest against the government. We are protected from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, and from discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, disability, religion or sexual orientation.

Workers have won important constitutional guarantees, including the right to fair labour practices, the right to form and join trade unions, strike and picket, and the right to collective bargaining

In terms of material improvements:

- People receiving social grants have increased from 3 million to 16 million.
- Over 3.3 million free houses have been built, benefiting more than 16 million people.
- About 12 million households have electricity, 7 million more than in 1994.
- Around 92% of South Africans have access to potable water, compared to 60% in 1996, and
- Twice as many young people attended university, twice as many graduated in 2012 than in 1994 and more than 1.4 million students have benefited from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

These advances explain why COSATU remains firmly in support of the African National Congress. On social issues they do indeed have a good story to tell. But on hard core economic transformation the story is not good at all.

And yet, despite all these advances, in 2014 we are seeing an unprecedented wave of strikes and community protests, clear evidence that millions of South Africans feel they have been left out of the new South Africa, that while they have human rights

and political freedom, these have not been matched on the socio-economic front. This was well summed up in the Final Declaration of COSATU's 11h National Congress in 2012:

“Workers, whether in far flung rural areas, or urban slums, say that they are no longer prepared to tolerate poverty wages:

- Mineworkers, who produce our wealth in the belly of the earth, are earning a tiny fraction of the surplus they produce.
- Farm workers who produce our food work under near slave conditions.
- Retail and commercial workers, many casualised women without basic benefits, barely make enough to pay for their transport.
- Security workers who protect us, and transport workers who take us to work, work unbelievably long hours for a pittance.
- Our nurses, teachers and police are not being fairly paid for the valuable services they provide.

“The majority of these workers, together with workers in the clothing factories, the foundries, and countless plants around the country work long hours and face dangerous conditions for poverty wages. Over half of South Africa's workers work for less than R3000 a month!

“Workers are demanding that the People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth (as promised by our Freedom Charter). Our members are speaking through our structures, demonstrating their lack of patience through wildcat strikes and service delivery protests.”

At the heart of all these discontents are the underlying problems of unemployment, inequality and corruption. While most of the poorest South Africans are less poor than before 1994, the richest South Africans are far better off, which has massively widened the wealth gap to the point that South Africa has become the most unequal society in the world.

The Sunday Times annual Rich List, unveiled on 1 December 2013, exposed just how much some of the very rich people are taking home and how much they own.

In 2012 the 2,952 top-paid company directors received an average of R2.2m a year or a gross salary of R186 314 a month. The highest-paid - David Hathorn, CEO of Mondi - earned over R76m.

Meanwhile 50% of the average workers in the formal sector, according to the most recent median salary data from Statistics South Africa, earn R33 600 a year (R2 800 a month). So workers on the median wage would have to work for 2,261 years - about 37 average lifetimes - to earn what Hathorn did in a single year.

The rich complain when workers demand double-digit increases, yet Hathorn's salary increased by 330% from the previous year. Is that not excessive, especially when it is compared to the expected 7% salary increase which researchers predict that workers will get in 2014?

Inequalities in wealth ownership are equally massive. The personal wealth of Christo Wiese, Chairman of Shoprite and Pepkor, amounts to R27.4 billion. This wealth is created by workers in Shoprite, Checkers and PEP, who work long hard hours, to earn enough to feed their families.

Their minimum wage is just R2300 a month (R27 600 a year). And that is only scheduled to go up this year to R2 350, clearly not an excessive increase!

Meanwhile, the firm's CEO, Whitey Basson, No 8 in the latest list of big earners, made R40 964 million, 1484 times as much as his lowest paid employee!

The Rich List provides powerful evidence to support the call by COSATU's 2013 Collective Bargaining, Organising and Campaigns Conference for a legislated national minimum wage, which would be an important first step towards greater equality and a springboard to drag millions of poor, overwhelmingly black, South Africans out of poverty.

We must also fight to transform our scandalous two-tier service provision. A still mainly white, rich minority can pay for top-class private services, while the mainly black, poor majority have to struggle with inefficient, under-resourced facilities.

On education we have made some progress to take forward the Freedom Charter vision - that "the doors of learning and culture shall be opened". But we still need to address the appalling conditions under which most educators and learners function, the lack of the most basic infrastructure, sanitation, computers, access to libraries and broadband.

We must ensure that the National Health Insurance pilot projects succeed, while keeping up the fight for the full roll-out of the NHI, and to address the current dysfunctionality of too many of our public hospitals.

We need to step up our campaign for better, safer, more reliable and more affordable public transport and an end to the privatisation of our highways through e-tolling.

On the critical question of land reform, our Freedom Charter says that "The land shall be shared among those who work it!" and the government is committed to a programme of land restitution and redistribution.

But overall, land redistribution has been moving at a snail's pace. Shortly after 1994, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) set a target of 25 million hectares, representing 30% of agricultural land, for transfer to Africans within the first five years of the land redistribution programme, but to date only about 7% has been transferred and most of the land distributed is not being used productively.

South Africa's systemic crisis

Before the worst world economic crisis that we speak to, South Africa was in deep crisis as a result of its own apartheid and colonial past. In other words, the world economic crisis simply deepened crisis mainly because of South Africa's underlying structural problems, inherited from our colonial and apartheid past. Our economy remains based primarily on the export of minerals, the domination of the mining and banking sectors and the consequent triple crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality.

Unemployment was already at an outrageous level before 2008. Then, between 2009 and 2012 the country lost 744 000 jobs. Between the fourth quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2012, the proportion of the unemployed without work for more than a year rose from 61% to 68%.

Today, by the more realistic expanded definition, which includes discouraged work-seekers, unemployment stands at a massive 35%. This proves that on top of the cyclical, global downswing, most of South Africa's unemployment crisis is structural.

The second arm of the crisis – poverty – is equally frightening. The 2010 Human Development Report revealed that 44% of workers in South Africa live on less than R10 a day, which only just pays for a loaf of brown bread, which currently costs R9.04.

So 44% of workers in South Africa are working for a loaf of bread a day. It is still intrinsically a low-wage colonial economy. Even though we created an estimated 1.9 million jobs between 2002 and 2007, these jobs seem to have increased rather than decreasing the levels of poverty, and since then more retrenchments have thrown even more people into poverty

The 2002 General Household Survey reported 18% of households had social grants as their main source of income, a number that the 2007 General Household Survey says increased to 22% and has remained at this level through to 2011, making grants the second largest source of income among South African households.

Poverty inevitably leads to hunger. The 2010 General Household estimated that 24% of households have inadequate access to food. In the 2011 Survey, this figure has shown some improvement, but still showing 21% of household having inadequate access to food, which roughly translates into 10 million South Africans. And yet, after nearly 20 years after we started trying to redistribute land, we cannot produce enough food to adequately feed all our people.

The third part of the crisis – inequality – is summed up in the statistic that the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, stood at 0.64 in 1995 but increased to 0.68 in 2008, which made us the most unequal society in the world.

The Minister of Finance has acknowledged that 50% of the population lives on 8% of national income in South Africa and recent estimates suggest that the top 5% of earners earn 30 times more than the bottom 5%.

The share of workers in national income declined from 55% in 2000 to 49% in 2008. During the crisis, the workers` share increased from 49% to 52% between 2009 and 2010, but has since fallen back below 50%. This is ‘reverse redistribution from the poor to the rich’.

And inequality is still very much defined along racial lines. The South African Race Relations Institute, analysing Statistics South Africa, show that the median salary for Africans in 2011 was R2 380, Coloureds earned R3 030, Indians earned R6 800 whilst whites earned R10 000. This is the story of inequalities in South Africa.

The Freedom Charter’s demand that "men and women of all races shall receive equal pay for equal work" is yet to be realised, almost 20 years into democracy.

Another area where we have failed dismally in the two decades since 1994 is corruption and the massive squandering of public funds, through the greed and/or incompetence of both public representatives and officials and private companies.

The Public Protector’s Nkandla report is just the latest exposure of profiteering by service providers, assisted by gross maladministration by state officials and lack of oversight by political representatives.

The solution to all these underlying problems remains a fundamental restructuring of our economy, away from the exploitative economy we inherited from the days of colonialism, which was based on the expropriation of our natural resources and the cheap migrant labour system. We have to replace this with a modern economy based on manufacturing industry.

This is why we are campaigning for the achievement of what we have called our “Lula moment”, inspired by the policies adopted by the former president of Brazil, who faced very similar problems of unemployment, poverty and inequality as we face, but chose the route of economic expansion, and higher minimum wages and social grants.

He did not solve all the country’s problems, but undoubtedly made Brazil a better place to live for millions of workers and the poor, and at the same time accelerated economic growth, increased employment by creating more demand for goods and services, and this did not cause the runaway inflation which critics had predicted would result. Our challenge is to do the same here.

Let us make sure that our next 20 years will transform the lives of the workers and the poor and bring us closer to the full realisation of the demand in our historic Freedom Charter.