

**Zwelinzima Vavi's Address to the TAC – Section27 Leadership School,
Braamfontein, 3 December 2013**

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important leadership school. It is now a common knowledge since nearly four months ago; I am compelled to make my public input as an individual activist and South African rather than as the General Secretary of the mighty federation of workers - COSATU.

Even so, let me be clear that although I make this input in my personal capacity as an activist, my views are tied to the consciousness of the working class itself, its struggles as well as its aspirations. It is from the toiling masses that I derive the strength, inspiration and the will to march on in spite of the difficulties.

I am delighted that this school considers an important question in our society. I am also glad that in a significant way, this gathering implores us to interrogate the advances made by the progressive civil society and the broader working class movement since 1994.

More comforting is the knowledge that we are also pondering on how we not only defend these victories, but also build on them, making new inroads and bringing our journey closer to a future where inequality, unemployment and poverty are points of historical reference.

Comrades and friends,

As revolutionaries, we believe that leadership is defined in the terrain of struggle. Therefore, as a starting point, it is important for us to dissect the type of environment we are in and the struggles confronting us.

Let me be forthright and admit that this period is possibly the most testing time for revolutionaries and all of us calling for a radical reconstitution of our society.

The South African Post Apartheid Reality

Comrades and friends,

While no one can deny 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, the right to conclude union security agreements and the right to collective bargaining.

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, we have to 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 19 years on, the poor remains angry at the slow pace of economic transformation.

I believe that the groundswell of popular protests and mobilisation that we are witnessing today is a living testimony of the failures of the capitalist system.

The struggles ahead call for unity and organization of the masses, greater vigilance against the mechanizations of the enemy and more determination to wage a battle with the forces of oppression until final victory.

Let me share with you what I think explains the groundswell of anger amongst the working class in South Africa today.

The apartheid fault lines remain in place in employment, healthcare, education, housing, transport, and across the entire broad spectrum of our society and its economy.

A rich, mainly white, minority gets the lion's share of wealth and economic power, access to world-class healthcare and education services in the private sector and a lifestyle amongst the most luxurious in the world.

The Forbes Rich List revealed the following about South Africa:

- South Africa leads the African continent and countries such as Nigeria and Egypt in terms names appearing on Forbes list of Africa's 50 Richest with 14 South Africans featuring on this list.
- Whilst the working class bemoans a decline in real wages and standard of living, South Africa's 14 richest have a combined net worth of \$28.79 billion, and an average net worth of \$2.06 billion.
- Of the 14 richest South Africans, only two are black, suggesting that the wealth of this country is concentrated in the hands of white males. Most of these fortunes were made on the back of the apartheid state which exploited blacks as cheap labour and introduced a raft of policies to ensure that "no single white person goes under"

This list makes it clear that capitalism is empowerment for the few. And that is why I have constantly advocated for the democratization of the control and ownership of the means of production, of the wealth of this country.

Meanwhile the overwhelmingly black, poor majority suffer from deep poverty, massive levels of unemployment, pathetic levels of service delivery in healthcare and education, housing and transport, and little hope of escaping from a daily struggle to survive. The overall unemployment level today stands at 35.6%.

Income inequality has increased across the board. In 1995, the Gini coefficient stood at 0.64 but it had increased to 0.68 in 2008. The share of employees in national income was 56% in 1995 but it had declined to 51% in 2009, i.e. there has been reverse redistribution from the poor to the rich.

The top 10% of the rich receive 33 times the income earned by the bottom 10% in 2000. This gap is likely to have worsened, given the fall in the share of employees in national income and the global economic crisis of 2008 wherein in South African we lost 1.17 million jobs.

And inequalities in income and wealth ownership are still racialised. An average African man earns in the region of R2 400 per month, whilst an average white man earns around R19 000, a racial income gap of roughly R16 800. Black women are yet to be liberated from the triple oppression.

While most white women earn an average of R9 600 per month, African women earn R1 200, a racial income gap of R8 400. 56% of whites earn more than R6 000 per month whereas 81% of Africans earn less than R6 000 per month.

Almost all the top 20 paid directors in JSE listed companies are white males, and in 2008 the top 20 directors of JSE-listed companies earned an average of R59 million per annum, whilst in 2009 the average yearly earnings of an employee was R34 000.

The means of production remain concentrated in white capitalist hands: 50% of JSE is account for by 6 companies and more than 80% is accounted for by large banks and companies engaged in the core of the minerals-energy-complex. Estimates of black ownership of JSE-listed companies range between 1.6% and 4.6%.

Women and children, especially black working class women are daily subjected to rape and abuse, in many of our cities, townships and villages and yet the repressive state apparatus seems more concerned about quelling resistance to the neo-liberal onslaught through the use of brutal and deadly force to break worker strikes and community protests.

This bleak picture explains the discontent of the poor in South Africa today.

These are the material conditions that not so long ago, led many of us to declare that in economic terms, it is capital that has reaped the fruits of our hard won freedom.

Neoliberalism produces its own gravediggers

This reality induces serious questions. What does this economic reality translate to in earnest? Could it be that the past 19 years of our democracy have mainly been about consolidating neoliberal capitalism whilst the working class has only received breadcrumbs falling from the capitalist master's table?

Perhaps I should desist from the pessimistic tone that these statistics invite and outline some of the positive aspects related to these developments.

One thing that I have come to appreciate is that the post apartheid capitalist order and accumulation regime has produced its own opponents and challengers.

The vast majority of the popular classes have not just been passive recipients of what the post apartheid capitalist order metes out.

Some of the biggest opponents of the post apartheid accumulation regime have emerged from your organisations in their various forms.

We have seen struggles located in the sphere of reproduction with movements fighting evictions, the privatisation of water and electricity as public goods and making a claim for quality housing for the poor.

We have witnessed movements emerge in the terrain of education and health, agitating for the poor's rights to access treatment and quality public education.

All these struggles teach us one important lesson: resistance is not futile!

Comrades and friends, the vast majority of the organisations that have challenged post apartheid inequalities and injustices are found within your ranks.

Most of the organisations that have gained footholds in townships and villages across the country are a reflection of the fact that the neoliberal onslaught has not gone unchallenged.

Organisations such as the TAC, Section 27, Equal Education and the likes are formations that are engaged in mass struggles, through marches and demonstrations, on various issues such as unemployment, housing, water, sanitation and education, health, HIV/AIDS, domestic violence including rape cannot simply be dismissed as imperialist inventions that seek to muzzle the ANC government out of power.

It is not the Free Market Foundation or Afri-Forum that is engaged in popular struggles that challenge the fundamental ways in which neoliberal capitalism organises our society!

To the contrary, the latter types of formations are engaged in a fierce contest to lower the living standards of the poor and erode the gains made by the popular classes in the post apartheid dispensation.

They seek to entrench labour market flexibility through the continued use of labour brokers and the introduction of the youth wage subsidy.

They seek to fortify the two-tiered labour market, increase the rate of exploitation and further segment the working class.

They seek to undermine the power and organizational force of the workers at

the point of production!

They are hell bent on eroding the industrial base of our economy, leaving an empty shell in which financialisation reigns supreme and the mass of unemployed workers have no possibility of ever finding employment.

They use the mass of unemployed people as an army to suppress wages and weaken the bargaining power of trade unions!

They are relentless in their opposition to increased social spending because their interest is to keep workers enslaved by the increasing burden to educate their children, to care for the sick and the elderly, to sojourn between the sphere of production and reproduction!

But all the same, these enemies of the working class escape the wrath of our detractors who throw all sorts of labels in our direction: “workerists”, “ultra-lefts” and “business unionists”.

And these often evade the radar of some of your harshest critics!

Organisations such as the TAC, Section 27 and many others are engaged in everyday popular mobilisation anchored around some of the principal demands of the Freedom Charter.

Let us remind everyone that it was your organisations that challenged the state’s blatant and murderous refusal to grant people leaving with AIDS the crucial treatment to pro-long their lives.

It was the TAC that, that through popular mobilisation and using the legal system, ensured that today a child born to an HIV positive mother has a fighting chance!

These are organisations that challenged the greed of giant and multinational corporates that posed a stumbling block to the cheaper access to HIV treatment.

These are the organisations that recently exposed a calamity state and market failure led to our children being deprived of textbooks for nearly a year.

Amongst these organisations are those that have decrying the market driven land reform process.

Therefore in essence comrades, these movements are soundboards for the working class’ frustrations with a commodified citizenship where access to basic needs is mediated through the market!

Your organisations constitute bulwarks against state privatisation and corporatization in the fields of education, health and housing.

Many are also a symbol of the disenchantment of the poor and their impatience with a slim state, which allows capital to trample on their chests without any genuine intervention!

Progressive civil society organisations are not in a war to save a minority from what liberals call a Tyranny of the Majority, they are instead in battlefields to annihilate the Tyranny of the Market.

But today, some including within the vanguard of the working class conclude that these movements are counter-revolutionary and describe them with all sorts of lofty phrases such as “anti-majoritarian liberal offensive”.

Instead of grabbing the bull by its horns and engaging in the daunting task to immerse itself in these struggles and fashion the wave of working class resistance and challenge to capitalism into a potent weapon that can challenge the beast that is capitalism, the Party chooses instead to act like the proverbial wedge driver, dividing working class formations at every turn.

In the 13th National Congress of the SACP in July 2012, COSATU was adamant that “our Party must fight the temptation to slide into easy condemnation, sectarianism, and negative labeling of all progressive organisations which it in fact needs to lead and mobilise against the capitalist system.”

The federation was also forthright that communists have to do this not as an optional extra but as part of the core elements of the work of the Party.

It evoked the powerful words of Mao Tse Tung who said that “Communists are like seeds and the people are like the soil. Wherever we go, we must unite with the people; take root and blossom among them.”[2]

Regrettably and as is clear for all to see, this warning has been blatantly ignored.

The Tasks at Hand

Dear friends,

Even at the most difficult times we must never surrender. It is clear that the post apartheid state is a capitalist state. This doesn't surprise us, as it was Lenin that said, “*A democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism, and, therefore, once capital has gained possession of this very best shell, it establishes its power so securely, so firmly, that no change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it.*”¹

¹ Lenin, V I, The State and Revolution, 1917.

We cannot therefore leave the question of working class mobilization unattended. Is it not the time to build a movement to plant the seeds for the germination of a movement for socialism – a broad anti-capitalist front? We are fortunate that we have the struggles taking place at the point of production and in the reproductive sphere to build upon. These struggles must coalesce into a united people's front against capitalism and its barbarism.

This brings me to a very important question: What are the tasks at hand? What role should your organisations play in building a future we can all be proud of?

1. To defend and advance the revolutionary socialist traditions and trajectory of the revolutionary trade union movement.
2. To defend and advance the immediate and radical implementation of the Freedom Charter, in full, as the only viable solution to the mass poverty, unemployment, and extreme inequalities in our country.
3. To resist all attempts to increase the rate of exploitation and segmentation of the working class through among others labour brokers and the the youth wage subsidy
4. Defend the sacrosanct workers' rights such as the right to collective bargaining
5. To fight for the abolition of the colonial wage and the immediate implementation of a minimum living wage in South Africa.
6. Defend the revolutionary unity of the working class.
7. Resist all attempts to defeat working class unity and to reduce militant organisations into toy telephone
8. We must mobilise to fight:
 - a. The neoliberal NDP!
 - b. E-tolls!
 - c. Apartheid geography of human settlement and economy
 - d. For manufacturing and re-industrialisation of our country and productive and quality jobs

- e. For better quality public education and health care and challenge the ideological onslaught against the public provision of these public goods

Comrades and friends,

I urge you not to see yourselves as anything else but a leading detachment of working class that want the government led by the ANC to succeed. We want the government to succeed because we know too well what will be the consequences of a failed state on the marginalised. Naturally we are partners of any progressive government. We are the allies of anyone who hates poverty and continuing deprivation of our people. Our energies should be harnessed and we should be provided resources so that we could even be more effective partners for development.

We will always be a threat to greedy parasites who have abandoned the basic goals of the NDR to address all three contradictions - black oppression, working class exploitation and women triple oppression. The pseudo revolutionaries and pseudo Marxists will feel threatened by our willingness to at all times speak truth to power. The corrupt and the self serving oligarchs will always see you as an irritation and will not hesitate to hire assassins to murder us.

Yet we know without the voices of organisations such as yours our democracy will be weakened. Accordingly you are an important ingredient of a functioning democracy - a cog without which our people will be exposed to the power of the greedy elites. You are an important voice that serve to amplify the collective voice of the poor into an organized channel of resistance and struggle. We must fight tooth for nail to preserve working class organisations from defeat from our internal and external detractors.

Aluta Continua! Organise or Starve!