

**Zwelinzima Vavi's address to the Civil Society Conference on the Electricity  
Crisis, 5 June 2015, Booyens Hotel, Johannesburg**

Thank you for inviting me to address this important gathering on South Africa's deep and far-reaching electricity crisis that gets worse every day, and which has so many serious effects on our lives:

- Chronic load-shedding,
- Electricity supply shortages,
- A financial meltdown of Eskom,
- Massive cost and time overruns in the generator building programme,
- Maladministration within Eskom's senior management,
- Devastating downgrading of Eskom by capital markets,
- A ballooning debt for the utility as municipalities fail to pay their bills to Eskom,
- Threats by Eskom to cut off about 10 municipalities, and
- Prospects of increased electricity tariffs.

All of this hits the working class and the poor hardest - yet their voices have been silenced; they are locked out of the so-called 'war room' which has been set up under the Deputy-President Cyril Ramaphosa to try to solve Eskom's problems.

It does not include trade unions or any other civil society organisations, just government officials from Department of Public Enterprises, Department of Energy, Treasury and representatives from Business Unity South Africa.

Since the beginning of the year, a number of trade unions and other civil society organisations who are represented here to day have been talking about launching a campaign to deal with this electricity crisis. Now it is time to turn talk into deeds.

The objective of this Conference on Electricity is for all those voices that have been excluded from the Eskom 'war room' to develop a working class and community response to the crisis, and to research, plan and struggle for a working class solution. Unless we develop an alternative worker and community agenda for sorting out the electricity mess and then set up a structure to campaign for its implementation, the consequences will be dire.

If we do not urgently address this question now, it will already be too late. The country will rapidly drift into long hours of darkness, load-shedding will be our daily life and

those who have always wanted to see Eskom broken up and privatised will be emboldened. If they succeed, Eskom will become a carcass for capitalist hyenas to feed on and get rich at the expense of the workers and consumers.

As well as the immediate power crisis, we must advance long-term solutions that will provide universal access to renewable and environmentally sustainable energy, including from water, wind and the sun, and distributed by a publicly owned and accountable utility.

The campaign must also relate the Eskom crisis to the broader crisis in a society in which unemployment, by the more realistic expanded rate which includes those who have given up looking for work, now stands at 36.1%, 1.5% higher than in the last quarter of 2014. This means that 8.7 million South Africans who are able to work cannot do so and join the ranks of the 54.3% of South Africans living in poverty.

Economic growth in the first quarter of 2015 was a paltry 1.3%, down from 4.1% in the last quarter of 2014. That means that the prospect of any early relief for the unemployed is fading fast.

All this added up to a national emergency even before the latest Eskom crisis. Now on top of all this, we have a drought which has caused agricultural production to fall by 16.6%, which is bound to lead to higher food prices. This once more underline the cruelty of the capitalist system of an injury to one is an opportunity to the other. When there is less food production due to the drought or any other reason the capitalist logic says that's the time you should increase prices.

No country can survive such levels of unemployment, poverty, hunger, inequality and low growth, as well as no stable power supply.

Yet on the very day that these shocking employment statistics were released, President Zuma was telling Parliament that “Our country is doing very well. The fundamentals are in place. Our institutions are strong and sound. All the arms of the state are functioning effectively: the executive, Parliament and the judiciary. This means are hard-won democracy is safe.”

This is outrageous denialism. Apart from the economic catastrophe, we see the disintegration of important constitutional structure – the NPA, SAPS, SARS, SABC, etc. This list keeps growing. Corruption and embezzlement of public funds is getting out of hand, which could well be part of the reason for Eskom’s disaster.

The crisis is typified by the government's outrageous response to the Public Protector's report on Nkandla, where R246 million was squandered on a house for one individual, yet the government sees no reason for the President and his ministers to take any responsibility for this theft from the public, but prefer to look for bureaucratic scapegoats.

So Mr President let us with the deepest respect beg to differ with you His Excellency. South Africa is not doing well. We are asking you Mr President to lead a delegation of your Cabinet Ministers to Soweto this evening and spend a night in any of those informal settlements or smaller than apartheid matchbox so that you can experience a 10 hours of blackout and possibly a night without any food. Most South Africans are extremely concerned about the country state of affairs. They were promised a decent work agenda as deliberate anti poverty and anti inequalities strategy. That dream is fading daily with unemployment now at record breaking levels.

They were promised that the education will be transformed as deliberate strategy to skill workers and get our economy going yet their reality is half of all learners are dropping out between grade 10 and grade 12. In just those three final years 50% of all learners leave school without completing Matric. In 2012 there were 1,1m learners in grade 10. Only 550,127 of these wrote their Matric exams in 2014.

They were promised that the health crisis will be dealt with and that the National Health Insurance will be introduced to put to an end to the two tier health system. Today there is hardly anybody talking about NHI. Yet their reality is that the Health systems across the country are in a state of collapse.

Shortages and stock outs of essential medicines including ARVs, pain killers, medicine for diabetes and hypertension, among others, continue to plague health facilities across the country. At the moment we are seeing unprecedented levels of stock outs in Mpumalanga, the Free State, and Limpopo with indications of serious problems on the horizon in Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal. Drug stock outs force people to make repeated, expensive and time-consuming trips to health facilities only to be turned away. They cause treatment resistance and make people lose hope in the health system. Most tragically, they cost lives. This is a serious threat to our ARV programme.

Hospitals and clinics continue to deteriorate, with equipment that is not maintained or not replaced when it is broken and in some areas critical staff shortages that result in essential services being brought to a halt. In a country with insufficient health care professionals, we allow those we have to work in impossible conditions, without the support, equipment or medicines they need to do their jobs.

We are revolutionaries who seek a total change of situation.

Regarding electricity our campaign must be vigilant to combat denialism or searching for scapegoats by the 'war room' over the Eskom crisis.

So I hope the conference, while focussing on Eskom will put it in the context of these other issues. I hope too that you will adopt the proposed plans to:

- Prepare for a massive campaign, including protests, litigation and lobbying of stakeholders, around the need for the working class and communities to strengthen our ability to impose our interests in long-term energy planning.
- Build alliances and synergies between different organisations already waging electricity-related struggles.
- Unite and strengthen existing struggles from different organisations and communities, and stimulating new ones where they do not currently exist.
- Develop regional structures to support these different struggles.
- Build up from below a broad-based and inclusive organized social force, based on people's power and workers' power, to struggle for a working class agenda around electricity.

I agree fully that the main targets for the conference are workers and communities affected by electricity, including:

- Workers in the power sector, or the energy intensive electricity consuming industries, and different unions who organise in Eskom;
- Communities struggling around electricity, in relation to load-shedding, or high prices, or poor quality of service such as unsafe cables, struggles around metering and disconnections, etc. Demarcation struggles are also related to service provision.
- Communities in municipalities where higher than average price rises are anticipated, either those already struggling or where there is potential for struggles to arise.
- NGOs working on related issues, including electricity, energy, environment, and land.
- Technical experts on pricing, or on renewables policy. Their role will be to support

and provide information and analysis.

- People working on alternatives, mainly around renewable energy.
- The environmental sector more broadly.
- People from other countries with relevant lessons

All this requires working class and community organisations to struggle to involve the widest possible constituency to take the campaign forward. It will not happen automatically.

We must call for a genuinely independent and preferably a judicial commission of enquiry to investigate the root causes of the crisis, including the management of the utility's contracts, apparent mismanagement and corruption within Eskom; cost and time overruns for Medupi and Kusile; and bonuses paid to Eskom directors and executives.

We must organise workers and communities to attend the NERSA public hearings to say NO to the ridiculous 25,3% increase on electricity tariffs. Approval of that will close many marginal mines and SMMES which will mean exacerbating the crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequalities. Eskom must not be allowed to just money to the problem. We need to find out the root causes of Eskom before we can agree with these ridiculous tariffs increases.

Now is the time to act together, formulate solutions and organise our resistance forces.