

## **ZWELINZIMA VAVI ON THE PAN-AFRICAN UNITY AND LABOURING CLASSES**

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Let me start by expressing my gratitude and delight for the invitation to this important and historic Pan African Congress. Thank you for understanding that I am addressing this congress on my individual capacity owing to the difficult political challenges facing the South African trade union movement today.

I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for organising this 8<sup>th</sup> Pan African Congress in South Africa. The socioeconomic and political challenges of our continent are usually summarized in one sentence – we are the richest continent in the world yet the poorest continent of the world.

Thank you for providing space for someone like me to speak about the conditions of the working class.

It has come at the time when Africa as a continent and Africans as a people, particularly the working class throughout the world, continue to suffer from oppression and super-exploitation in the midst of a deepening global capitalist crisis.

One of the criticisms we usually make of ourselves is that we the Africans spend more time articulating our historic deprivations than searching for solutions and acting decisively to undo our colonial past. I hope I will find a balance in ensuring that whilst I can address this ugly past, but at the same time I can also answer the question – what is to be done. The challenge is how to do all this in 15 minutes.

### **Africans' socio-economic conditions in historical context**

The contemporary socio-economic conditions of the Africans in general, and the African working class in particular, have to be looked at in their historical context.

The introduction of capitalism from above through colonialism and slavery has not only transformed African peasants into wage-earners, but has also installed an economic structure which served the interests of the capitalist colonial powers.

Colonial capitalism produced an economic structure, which positioned Africa as a supplier of raw materials, crops and cheap labour for metropolis and settler colonial capitals.

Trans-Atlantic slave trade, which was carried out by European capitalists in collaboration with African elites, placed Africans in the North and South of America and the Caribbean as slaves and later as wage-labourers in these continents.

Africans did not just act as passive victims of colonial capitalism and slavery, but acted as conscious subjects to fight against their oppression.

It is these struggles that have produced many forms of resistance, including the slave revolt, which led to the creation of the Haitian state in 1804.

It is these struggles that produced and inspired the anti-colonial struggles that produced heroes and heroines such as CLR James, Walter Rodney, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, George Padmore, Du Bois, Julius Nyerere, Franz Fanon and many others.

Workers played a key role in the fight against colonial capitalist oppression and exploitation. They fully understood the connection between political forms of racial domination and exploitation. The chairperson of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, speaking at its inaugural conference, accurately captured this understanding in 1955, when he said:

*You cannot separate politics and the way in which people are governed from their bread and butter, or their freedom to move to and from places where they find the best employment, or the houses they live in or the type of education their children get.*

### **Post-colonialism: politics and economics**

Upon independence, many of the post-colonial governments expected workers and their trade unions to increase productivity and act as disciplinary instruments of militant and fighting workers. And this generated class conflict between the post-colonial elites, which now acted as new rulers, and in alliance with the erstwhile colonial capital.

Because many of the African post-colonials had no capital of their own, they largely used the state as an instrument and site for capital accumulation through corruption and other means, including mobilizing the working class along ethnic lines to gain electoral support for their own narrow elitist economic interests.

The onset of neo-liberal economic restructuring through the Structural Adjustment Programme worsened the socio-economic conditions of the African labouring classes and poor peasants. Most African countries are still facing daunting development challenges with almost 50% poor people, 30% of the workforce unemployed or under-employed, an excessively high rate of youth unemployment and predominantly precarious and informal jobs.

Africa's legacy of underdevelopment is a result of centuries of the pillaging of its natural resources, slavery and super-exploitation of its labour by colonial powers and global big business. In 2009, 22 of 24 nations which were identified as having 'Low Human Development' on the UN Human Development Index were located in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, 34 of the 50 nations on the UN list of least developed countries were in Africa.

African economies remain overly dependent on the export of raw materials – gold, diamonds, cocoa, coffee, etc, rather than manufacturing industry. These have been subject to adverse and persistent terms of trade shocks, and have led to a relative decline in Africa's share of global income. Africa's share of income has been consistently dropping over the past century by every measure. In 1920, the average European worker earned about three times what the average African did. Now, the average European earns 20 times what the average African does.

The world trade regime is discriminatory. It protects the developed nations at the expense of the developing world, including the whole of Africa. With almost 1 billion inhabitants representing approximately 14% of the world population, Africa provides approximately 2% of the global GDP and less than 1% of the global industrial value-added output. The share of Africa in global exports does not reach 2% of developing countries' exports. In international trade, Africa is marginalised because it receives less

than 5% of the FDI (or Foreign Direct Investments) and is further subjected to unfair economic arrangements designed before and strengthened during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The continuing underdevelopment of the African economy and consequent high levels of poverty, hunger, unemployment, and preventable and treatable diseases such as TB, malaria and HIV/Aids remain Africa's main challenges. On average between 35% and 60% of the inhabitants live below the poverty line on the continent.

The living conditions of the African working class have also been worsened by the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies which saw the cut of social expenditure, thus rolling back the welfare states. Furthermore, many of the African workers were also driven out of employment.

### **What is to be done?**

In thinking about how to change our conditions, we obviously need to distinguish what is immediately achievable and what broader systemic changes are required to fundamentally change the socio-economic conditions of the working class in Africa and worldwide.

The main reason behind Africa's inability to extricate herself from its quagmire of underdevelopment is the untransformed colonial economic structure which still act as a provider of raw materials and cheap labour to the advanced and developing capitalist countries such as China.

This makes Africa to largely depend on these countries for their economic needs.

Furthermore, the profits that are generated in Africa are taken out the continent through legal and illegal capital flight channels, thus leaving Africa without investable surplus to build her economy.

This reality calls on us to organize and mobilize for industrialization of Africa in order to diversify her industrial structure.

African trade unions have made important calls in the past which include:

The development of a clear vision and over-arching Growth and Development Path to drive a bold developmental agenda in the interest of the continent and its people. This strategy should draw lessons from the experiences of developing countries in general and the economic history of Africa in particular, as well as other regions of the world. Primarily, the development strategy should:

- Be based on a long term vision spanning from 10 to 30 years with five- year development plans, and on the needs and priorities of African people;
- Assign a central and leading role to the democratic state while recognising the role of the market within that framework and not parallel or separate from it;
- Facilitate the creation and the preservation of a socio-political and development-friendly environment; and
- Promote regional integration. It should further ensure the:
  1. Development of cartels in those sectors or industries where we have massive endowments for purposes of influencing price setting and defining the terms of

trade in our favour, which should also enhance job creation industries from unfair competition, particularly against multinational companies

2. Development of laws and policies that protect small economies
3. Centrality of a democratic developmental state in all our countries to ensure an integrated and participatory national agenda for development
4. Prioritisation of job creation, which must be placed at the centre of all state policies through the creation of an enabling macro-economic policy environment and state investment in productive economic activities. In this regard, green jobs must be given utmost priority
5. African trade unions to work together so that measures are taken in favour of these new strategies

Most such interventions will not be possible without the promotion of democratic governance in all areas within the states and regional communities. To this end, African governments should take measures to improve their internal system of political coordination and use their human and material resources in a collective manner to increase their visibility, interests and bargaining positions in intergovernmental debates, especially in the IMF, World Bank, the WTO, the G20, or the United Nations system as a whole.

Our calls extend to general mobilization to rescue the continent from the shackles and failures of neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism and capitalism through the active mobilization of the people, stakeholders and communities to be engaged in all the issues affecting our countries and the whole continent.

We need a campaign for the democratic control and ownership of all our natural resources and the beneficiation of our mineral and natural resources and the development of value-adding manufacturing, and agro-processing industry, to create sustainable and decent employment.

We need a campaign by Governments led by the African Union (AU) to take measures to stop the flight of capital from African countries, which increases the vulnerability of national economies, whilst also promoting productive capital investment and not speculation. And we need a campaign for programmes that radically improve the quantity and quality of education, healthcare, housing, social welfare and all other services to the people.

None of this can happen without strengthening the role of civil society, the labour movement in particular, in the formulation of policy and involvement of communities in the same. The AU and the Pan-African Parliament to put in place mechanisms aimed at bringing a speedy end to the civil wars and conflicts, which beset our continent.

### **Politically**

Finally, workers around the world, not only in Africa, have always elected political elites that have implemented policies that do not serve their political and economic interests. Perhaps, we need to think very hard about how we should politically organize workers to represent their own interests in the state.

Thank you again for inviting me.