

May Day 2015 speech by Zwelinzima Vavi, Durban march

Greetings Comrades all!!

Today we march in concert with millions of workers all over the world to celebrate International Workers' Day. We stand with workers in Greece, in Syria, in Bangladesh, in Argentina, in Zambia, in Canada and in every other country of the world to pronounce our determination to step up the struggle against exploitation and oppression. For while the global elite get richer and richer, the working class continues to be condemned to poverty.

In standing together against exploitation we also gather to celebrate our past victories. This includes the victory of the working class in South Africa in winning 1st May as a paid public holiday in 1994. This was not given to us on a plate. It was a struggle started in 1904, intensified in the 1980's, and finally won immediately after our first democratic election.

In celebrating our victories we remind all workers of our potential power to bring about change through collective action. We need this reminder right now, at a point when tragically the workers' movement in our country is far from united. For proof of this, look no further than the parallel marches and rallies taking place across the country. This is not something which we can smile about.

Our movement is at a crossroads. There are powerful forces at work which are determined to see to conclusion the transformation of COSATU from a powerful and critical giant into a domesticated mouse. They wish to see an end to COSATU's honest questioning of the policy directions and actions of its Alliance partners and government. No more Section 77 Protest strikes against an economic policy which is growing profits at the expense of workers' wages, and which is promoting de-industrialisation and job losses. No coordinated and militant campaign to do away with the apartheid wage structure of low pay and high levels of pay inequality. No radical rallying around the electricity crisis. No challenge to the increasing levels of corruption. No voice against abuses of power by the police and intelligence services. No acting together with civil society organisations who are now conveniently labelled "agents of imperialism".

The domesticated mouse is expected to rally together for ceremonial purposes only, as cheerleaders of those who wish to pretend that the workers of South Africa are free from the chains of continued exploitation.

We all know this continued exploitation intimately, but let me put some figures to it:-

We have seen a continuous increase in the share of wealth that is appropriated by company shareholders, compared to the continuous decline in the share of wealth allocated to workers' wages. The wage share has declined from 56% of the country's wealth in 1994 to below 50% today.

This declining wage share is happening despite increased productivity of workers. In simple terms it means that a redistribution from the poor to the rich has been taking place!

The median wage is currently R3300 and is getting lower! This means that half of all workers earn below this figure. Low pay exists even in the most profitable companies. In Checkers, a full time permanent worker earns not much more than R2300 a month. And remember that two thirds of the Checkers' workforce does not enjoy permanent full-time status and is therefore even worse off. Compare this to the 2013 income of CEO Whitey Basson – a staggering R627 million including earnings from shares!

The low wages that the majority of workers earn have to be shared with the families of one in three adults who do not have jobs. It is little wonder then that 13 million people go to bed hungry every night in this country, and that a further 14.8 million are at risk of hunger. Malnutrition is actually expanding, resulting in stunted growth, blindness, incomplete mental development, and other health problems. A 2014 report released by Stats SA indicated that 20.2% of our population lives in extreme poverty.

On top of this we have billionaires who are sitting on unproductive billions. We have the Rupert family sitting on R82 billion, the Oppenheimer family R78bn, Christo Wiese R42bn, and Patrice Motsepe R35bn. Precious little of the accumulated wealth of these and other billionaires is being ploughed into local industrial development and sustainable job creation. Big wealth, whether black or white, is serving to entrench rather than challenge our colonial economic heritage of a reliance on the export of raw materials.

But it is not only our own workers' movement that is at a crossroads and in danger of being reduced to observer status in society. Many of our traditional allies, in the form of the Youth Leagues and the Civic Associations, are de-mobilised and riven with division. Many of our state institutions are suffering the same fate, including the NPA and SARS. And key state services, in particular health and education, are in disarray. Let me spend a little time on these two services.

On the health front, systems across the country are in a state of collapse. We are

seeing shortages and stock outs of essential medicines including ARVs, pain killers, medicine for diabetes and hypertension. The worst cases are in Mpumalanga, the Free State, and Limpopo with indications of serious problems on the horizon in Gauteng and Kwa Zulu 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 critical staff shortages in some areas. Not only do we have staff shortages, but many of the health care workers we do have are forced to work in impossible conditions, without the support, equipment and medicines they need to do their jobs. Tens of thousands of Community Health Care Workers are not even recognised as workers. Yesterday 1,000 of them demonstrated to the Gauteng Department of Health to demand recognition as employees, not volunteers. Similar protests in the Free State have been rewarded with criminal charges against 118 protestors. These health care workers are not a luxury. The system cannot function without them. We must support their demands.

Emergency Medical Services are dysfunctional in many areas. We hear of people calling for ambulances that never come or arrive days later. The strain of providing care in an emergency falls on community members, on grandmothers, on NGOs.

The vital National Health Laboratory Service, which analyses the tests done in clinics and hospitals is on the brink of collapse as a consequence of a financial crisis created by Provinces which do not pay for its services. Labs are closing across the country, putting the largest ARV programme in the world at risk.

At the start of President Jacob Zuma's first term we were promised the hope of growing quality and equality in health care through National Health Insurance (NHI). We hardly hear this word anymore! Tragically, even if the political commitment to NHI were to return, it will be difficult to build quality health on a system that has collapsed in many parts. Our health system needs urgent and coordinated action to ward off collapse. Without it, the rights of the people of South Africa will continue to be violated and health care needs will continue to go unmet.

Our education system is equally in crisis. We are seeing students campaigning for the transformation of university campuses which have done too little to move away from the project of white domination for which they were established. Students have our full support in campaigning against academic exclusion and for greater access to

tertiary education for black students, particularly those from working class communities.

But the intellectual dispossession begins much earlier than this, from birth in fact. Of the 7 million children aged 0-6 living in South Africa, only around 1.5m are in Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs, like pre-schools and grade R classrooms. After missing out on these crucial developmental years, most children can never catch up. This is the worst structural racism in our society.

Once children get to school the situation hardly improves. Education is better today than under apartheid. Almost every child can access grade 1, and the outcomes are significantly better than in the past. But the quality remains poor and the inequality is massive. An evaluation report produced in 2013 by a unit established by the Minister of Basic Education said of grade 5 reading in rural areas:- "*The average reading comprehension was 21%... Six percent of the sample scored 0 out of 20 and a further 69% achieved 5 or less... The country urgently needs a program that will enable teachers to teach literacy more effectively.*" Instead of releasing this report for a national debate on our challenges, the Minister has suppressed it for more than a year.

Our high school record is equally alarming. Half of all learners are dropping out between grade 10 and grade 12. Why is this happening? Firstly, many young people have lost faith in education when they see so many unemployed matriculants and graduates. Secondly, schools are dangerous, poorly-resourced places, and transport is expensive. Thirdly, poor foundations in reading result in many young people finding school upsetting - it makes them feel stupid instead of building their confidence and knowledge. Lastly, many schools under national pressure to improve the matric pass rate, force struggling students out.

At the same time there is a worrying trend of black children in townships and rural areas being pushed into subjects that deny them opportunities. Instead of doing sciences, mathematics and history, most of our children are taking subjects like consumer studies, tourism and maths literacy. This is a new class-based Bantu Education, where the children of the poor are prepared for lives of labour, if they are lucky! We need a revolution in our education system to undo these trends and build equal education for all.

We will never wage effective class struggle unless working class children are taught well. This requires that teachers must be well-paid and supported. We will never defeat inequality if our education system entrenches it further. We call on comrades to join campaigns for school transport, for school infrastructure, for better quality

teaching and learning, and to serve on school governing bodies with energy and determination.

In the midst of organisational and societal crisis, what then should our project as organised workers be in the 60th Year of the Freedom Charter, and the 21st Year of our democracy?

We have to be focused and practical. We have not to mope and mourn in a corner, but to mobilise and organise around a common set of demands. We have to protect and defend our existing trade union members, whilst recruiting to expand our ranks, especially amongst those who are most vulnerable. We have to build unity in action.

Our priority areas for action must include:-

1. Organising unorganised workers, particularly the most vulnerable workers. This includes domestic, construction and farm workers, workers in small companies, casual workers, sub-contracted workers, informal sector workers, and all other workers who are part of a growing number of so-called atypical workers.
2. Re-igniting our Living Wage Campaign, including providing active support to public sector workers currently in dispute
3. Actively advancing our demand for a National Minimum Wage set at a decent level
4. Taking forward our demands for radical economic transformation, including industrialisation, trade policies which promote inward growth and job creation, and serious skills development (as opposed to the money for buddies type skills development currently taking place under the auspices of the SETAs)
5. Campaigning for stability and equity in our electricity system, in particular in Eskom, as well as in our postal services and in Telkom, where workers and customers face an equally bleak future
6. Tackling the challenges of the health and education systems

Our programme of action must be inclusive and talk to the needs of the working class as a whole. This does not mean that as unions we claim to speak FOR the entire working class. But we have an obligation to build solidarity with sections of the working class who are self-organising around critical issues such as health, education, municipal services, corruption, and xenophobia.

On International Workers' Day, as on every other day, we need also to consider how we link our daily struggles to the struggles of workers across our borders, in Africa as whole, and in the world at large. We recognise that for all the levels of exploitation

and poverty we face here in South Africa, there are others who face even worse levels of grinding poverty and desperation, brought about by failed states and collapsed economies. South Africa presents itself through popular soapies as the land of milk and honey. Is it any wonder then that desperate workers from beyond our borders find their way here in search of a better life? Only to find themselves homeless and desperate, and set up against South African workers by ruthless employers.

We have a twofold obligation. The first is to recruit these super-exploited workers into our ranks and to defend them by taking the fight to the real enemy. The second is to be part of building a united vision for a liberated Africa – an Africa where the fruits of our rich natural resources are shared and used in the interests of sustainable industrial development. We need to be part of a movement for a new agenda for our Continent. It must be an agenda which builds democracy and accountability, rids us of despots, and which puts the people first.

All this is not possible until we act collectively to rebuild the trade union movement not only in our country but in our region, continent and the world over. More than any other time in our history we need strong, independent, militant and fighting unions whose only purpose of existence is to fight in the corner of workers and the marginalised. We can no longer afford to have unions ignoring the plight of workers whilst it's leaders negotiate plum government and private sector jobs. More than ever we need unity on the ground across previous divisions that have only benefited the bosses and political hyenas. This May Day of 2015 must represent a turning of page!

Forward to the power of the international working class!

Don't moan, mobilise! Don't mourn, organise!