

## **Stop economic apartheid – don't buy e-tags**

By Zwelinzima Vavi

TODAY is one of the saddest days in the post-apartheid history of our country: As a law-abiding citizen of a free and democratic South Africa, I find myself in an untenable position of having to ask fellow South Africans to join me in defying the Government's opportunistic introduction of e-tolls. I have offered my name and reputation to the cause of using civil disobedience to dismantle the gantries that have become an affront and eye sore to the millions of the working class poor.

As the gantries go live this morning, I want to reiterate the reasons why I'm not buying the e-tags. These are:

1. *The e-tolls will add to the burdens of the poor:* Thousands of low paid workers are unavoidably travelling in private cars (either their own or pooled transport) on Gauteng freeways to get to work or attend funerals and/or sporting and social activities. It is rubbish to suggest that these workers who travel between Pretoria and Johannesburg and who work as educators and in the administration offices of government form part of the rich or middle strata of our society. They use their cars because there is no adequate public transport that is accessible, affordable, safe and reliable in our country.
2. *The e-tolls will exclude the poor from using the best public infrastructure:* The logic of making people to pay is that those who don't have money to pay will be excluded from using the facility. We are told that those who can't afford must use alternative roads or use public transport. Yet we know in many cases there are no such alternatives. This means the divisions between the "haves" and the "have-nots" will continue and be accentuated. The rich will continue using best roads whilst the poor are forced into potholes of the municipal roads which are now going to cater for all those avoiding first-class highways. This is why we've called e-tolls economic apartheid.
3. *Public transport is totally inadequate, inaccessible, costly and unsafe:* We know government has exempted the registered public transport. What government did not tell us is that taxis and busses constitute only 5% of the vehicles using the Gauteng highways. A former President once referred to the taxis carrying workers as mobile coffins. Apart from the bus rapid transit system in Joburg and Cape Town, there has been no single new subsidized bus route in 10 years. The Port Elizabeth one is a shambles as corrupt cadres demand a stake. Under these circumstances, the use of private cars is no luxury but unavoidable.
4. *E-tolling is privatization through the back door:* Gauteng highways are owned by the state and Sanral, the state-owned agency, must maintain them on a cost recovery plus profit basis. Sanral has now subcontracted this to private firms whose only

purpose of existence is profits. The main company that will operate these e-tolls is from Austria; not even a SA company. That's why e-tolls are privatization through the back door, and a commodification of the most basic public services which were historically provided by the state. It's a further encroachment of the private sector and profit rules into the public space.

5. *E-tolling is the most expensive way of recovering road costs:* We've argued – and continue to believe that – the roads should be paid through a combination of income tax (a new bracket for super rich), taking from the fuel levy and a compulsory prescribed investment from retirement funds and all other investors in state-owned infrastructure. Most of the infrastructure we inherited from the apartheid state was paid for by the prescribed investment by retirement funds. Our government has rejected this insisting on using e-tolls.

If we don't stop this model, which is now being forced down our throats in Gauteng, it will soon be extended to Cape Town, Durban and other major cities.

No person who believes in fairness must support this model. No socialist or communist or any organisation of the people worth its salt can support commodification and privatization of the most basic services that our people have enjoyed for so long.

I think our Government has squandered another opportunity of showing itself to be a caring state by running roughshod over public resistance to e-tolls. We must resist the e-tolls with everything we've got. We must do it for the sake of generations after us. Don't buy e-tags! Continue using the highways! Down with economic apartheid!

- The author is the General Secretary of Cosatu. He writes here in his personal capacity.