

Cut-offs and privatisation

Soweto fights back

In early 2000, activists from Soweto formed the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). This was done to fight Eskom's programme to cut off electricity. Initially based in Pimville, Diepkloof and Orlando, the SECC has now expanded to other areas of Soweto. In the last year, the SECC has embarked on increasingly militant action. This has attracted people, no longer willing to sit around whilst Eskom steals their basic needs so it can recover costs from the working class.

The SECC is affiliated to the Anti-privatisation Forum (APF). The APF consists of unions, community organisations and non-governmental organisations that are against privatisation and prepared to fight it. The APF was formed in July 2000 when two battles against privatisation united: the outsourcing of services at Wits University and the Johannesburg municipality's iGoli 2002 privatisation plan.

This article shares the story of some of the SECC action. This is done against the background of the planned privatisation of Eskom and the non-delivery of the ANC promise of free electricity.

Take control

The struggle of the SECC is not just about electricity cut-offs. It is about challenging the bosses' politics and power that lie "behind the ANC's restructuring of

Rob Rees looks at the struggle against electricity cut-offs and privatisation.

electricity. In doing this, workers and youth are part of a new movement rebuilding their own future with hope and confidence and regaining control over an important part of their lives.

A corporatised Eskom

Eskom is the government-owned parastatal responsible for 97% of South Africa's electricity. In March, Eskom announced its plan to cut the electricity of over 130 000 Soweto houses that had not paid for electricity and arrears.

By cutting the electricity to these houses, Eskom hopes to increase its profits. This will help Eskom prepare for corporatisation. Corporatisation, as specified in the Eskom Conversion Act, means Eskom will become a company that pays tax and profits to the government.

Eventually, the government wants to privatise a third of the power generation market. Privatisation will allow companies to invest in power stations and make profits from supplying electricity. However, the potential investors are not satisfied with Eskom's current profit of 10c per rand. These investors demand 16c

per rand. (Currently Eskom electricity prices are amongst the cheapest in the world.) So Eskom's chief executive officer, Thulani Gcabashe, has said that the price of electricity must increase.

Operation Khanyisa

The Eskom cut-off campaign accelerated in Soweto this year. Unidentified personnel, often subcontracted and assisted by armed police and private security guards, implemented the cut-offs. The SECC responded by calling for a defiance campaign, called Operation Khanyisa (Operation Light-up). Several well-attended mass meetings held in Soweto earlier this year endorsed Operation Khanyisa. As Eskom cuts electricity, activists reconnect working class and poor households. In some areas, Eskom cut-off teams have clashed violently with residents.

The electricity cut-offs cause untold hardship to workers and the poor. It results in food rotting, health hazards related to medicines that require refrigeration, and cooking difficulties. The cut-offs generally worsen what are already very difficult circumstances.

Operation Khanyisa is spreading through other APF affiliates to the townships of the Vaal and the East Rand.

SECC demands

The feeling of the mass meetings was militant and defiant. Many older residents attended. Their only household income is a small state pension of R570 per month of which they use as much as 40% to pay for electricity. But increasingly attendance came from a layer of youth that are unemployed and determined to defend their families and communities.

Research commissioned by the SECC shows that most households cannot afford to pay their electricity bills or their often-

huge arrears. Many residents owed Eskom over R10 000, which given their income was impossible to pay. Others had monthly bills of R7 000, which were clearly inaccurate. So the SECC called for:

- the scrapping of electricity arrears;
- a halt to the electricity cut-offs (which in some areas included clinics and schools);
- an end to corruption in payments and reconnections;
- proper and accurate billing and the checking of faulty metres;
- affordable electricity and free electricity for pensioners - the rich must subsidise the poor;
- the immediate implementation of the ANC promise of free electricity; and
- consultation with residents, taking their needs and dignity into account.

Free electricity

Many residents felt that the cabinet-adopted 50Kwh of free electricity per month was too little. *The Star* determined that 50Kwh will only allow you to boil a kettle for ten minutes, 17 times a month. A debate on the ground should decide how much electricity should be free. Current discussions suggest that 200Kwh is more in line with the needs of the working class.

As part of the APF, the SECC has also had discussions with other communities about the problems associated with 'free' electricity. These relate to the following:

- The ANC has not yet fulfilled its promise of free electricity. Eskom will only implement free electricity next year, following upgrading.
- The working class will pay for the 'free' electricity, through bigger price increases for those that consume more than 50Kwh.
- The free electricity will only be implemented once users pay their arrears. Thus, the poor will probably never get free electricity.

- The ANC plan to privatise electricity will mean higher prices to satisfy the demand for profits from the investors. The government's own consultants predict a price increase of between 22 and 50%.

Mass action

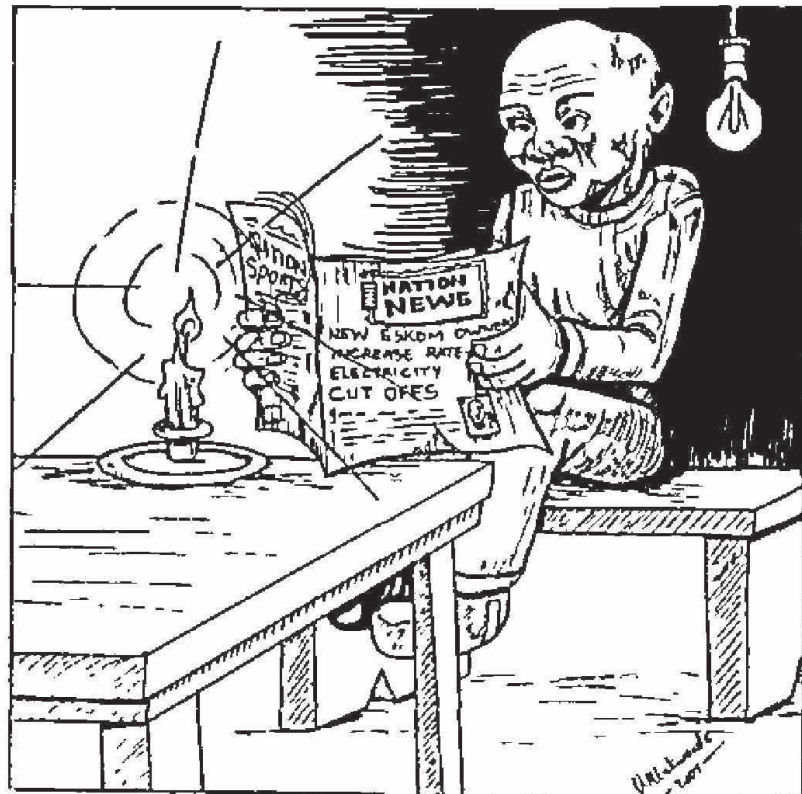
In pursuit of its demands, the SECC has marched to the Jabulani municipal offices in Soweto twice already. More than a thousand people participated in the march on 9 June. A number of mass meetings were held to prepare for this march.

At the Jabulani municipal offices, the SECC presented memoranda addressed to Amos Masondo, the mayor of Johannesburg. The memoranda were addressed to Masondo because Johannesburg contracts Eskom to supply electricity to Soweto. Masondo has not yet replied to the demands of the SECC.

On 16 June, as President Thabo Mbeki marched to the Hector Peterson memorial, the SECC demonstrated. It called on Mbeki to deliver free electricity and stop the cut-offs.

More recently, the SECC attended the Eskom stakeholders meeting. This meeting is Eskom's attempt, say SECC activists, to legitimise the cut-offs. At the meeting the SECC felt that Eskom ignored their demands. And so, following a caucus with the community representatives, started an occupation of the Eskom offices.

Following the sit-in, Eskom called pensioners to special meetings. The pensioners were told to bring their pension cards and the title deeds to their houses. Eskom is trying to secure direct "deductions from their pensions. This



Cartoon: Vutumuzi Mlatwende

would mean pensioners could lose their houses should they fail to pay or die leaving a debt. The SECC has strongly opposed this.

Join the APF!

The SECC and the APF is recruiting workers and shopstewards to Operation Khanyisa and the affiliates of the APF. So it sent a letter to the leadership of COSATU-Wits, asking to address the recent COSATU-Wits Shopsteward Council. However, the COSATU-Wits leadership did not reply to the letter. So the APF set up a table and pamphleted those shopstewards attending.

The call from the APF was quite simple: 'The APF supports COSATU's fight against privatisation, particularly of Eskom. Let us then unite and fight the ANC's policy of privatisation and delivery to the bosses.' ★

Rob Rees is SAMWU-Gauteng restructuring coordinator and an activist in the APF. He wrote this article in his personal capacity. If you want to join the SECC or the APF call 072 152 4220 or (011) 339 4121.