

Questions for the Left on power and leadership

Why is the majority who want peace and equality silenced by a super rich minority?

Why do we collude in this silencing? **Pregs Govender** asks some uncomfortable questions and believes that ordinary people can build power through the realisation that each of us is able to lead and to wisely choose who we want to follow.

Those who claim ownership of the world's wealth are a handful of people yet they rule and assert their values of greed, hate and fear. Through international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as through ownership and sponsorship of media and educational institutions, this group has rationalised its actions even though they have increased conflict and inequality.

Why is it that those who are in the majority, who want peace, justice and equality, are seemingly powerless? What is it that creeps into our hearts and silences us? What is it that makes us complicit? Why do those motivated by hate, greed and fear manipulate us so easily? What is the process by which we shut our eyes to injustices? Why is it that patriarchal authoritarian capitalist values remain intact? Why do they guide individuals as well as political and economic institutions, trade unions and political parties? Why is it that misogyny, the hatred of women, continues so that women form the majority of the poorest, and bear the worst of violence and HIV/AIDS?

Why don't leaders that we vote into power stand up for the poor by changing policies and practices that push people into poverty and deny them the rights that they worked for and won?

Why is it that after overthrowing colonial or apartheid rulers, we do not move from 'political democracy to economic democracy'? Tanzania's Julius Nyerere said: "At the World Bank they asked me 'How did you fail?' I responded that the British ruled us for 43 years. When they left I took over a country where 85% of the adult population was illiterate; there were 2 engineers and 12 doctors. When I stepped down in 1988 there was 91% literacy, and nearly every child was in school. We had trained thousands of engineers and doctors and teachers. The per capita income was \$280."

Ten years later, Tanzania's per capita income had halved to \$140. Enrolment in schools had fallen to 63%, and conditions in health and other social services had deteriorated. In ten years Tanzania had done everything the IMF and the World Bank wanted.

What happens to each of us when we step into positions of power - in unions, political parties,

parliaments and governments? How do vested interests hold us to ransom? What are some of the global economic and trade prescriptions that countries are expected to follow that undermine the political, economic and social rights won in our constitutions? Why is it that those chosen to represent the poor and the working class, so often fail to understand the consequences of their decisions or deliberately collude?

WHY THESE BAD DECISIONS?

In 1993 in the National Economic Forum, Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) endorsed GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs). There are several studies that have documented how it impacted on the lives of workers. Huge numbers of clothing and textile workers, mainly women, lost their jobs. From work where they were protected by labour laws that they had fought for, they moved into sectors that were unregulated and unprotected.

In 1996, South Africa's growth, employment and redistribution strategy, Gear, was launched. It aimed at "a faster fiscal deficit reduction programme... a reduction



William Matlala

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in tariffs... tax incentives to stimulate investment... an expansion of trade and investment flows in Southern Africa... flexibility within the collective bargaining system." It promised: "a growth rate of 6 per cent per annum and job creation of 400 000 per annum by the year 2000."

Gear's target of 400 000 new jobs per annum by 2000 had by 2007 not been met. Jobs created were mainly in low-paid, and unprotected work, and the numbers of jobs did not match the increase in the labour force. The result is that unemployment, as well as the numbers of 'working poor', particularly women, have increased substantially. Many women survive in unprotected and sometimes dangerous work: in piece, seasonal, domestic and sex work.

While leaders speak peace, the global trend is an increase in military spending and our country is no exception. While the public focus has been on corruption, the issue that precedes corruption is that the arms-deal was a misplaced priority. The UN report 'Women, War and Peace', draws a link between the militarisation of society and

increased levels of violence against women on the streets, across borders and in homes. Countries at war and emerging from war reflect the same tragic statistics. From the US to Iraq, from Zimbabwe to Israel and Palestine, to our country, women share the same story of gendered violence.

Many developing countries have signed the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). GATS commits countries to commercialise and privatise their public services including health, education, water and social welfare. Just before the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa signed GATS and a year later Parliament ratified it.

In Senegal, one of the first to privatise water in accordance with GATS, studies show that women spend more time finding clean water than they did before privatisation.

There are many other economic and trade prescriptions which explain why poverty and HIV/AIDS mortality statistics across the world are not decreasing, despite all the talk. Most poor and 'middle income' countries signed trade agreements with the US in which they wrote

away their right to import or produce affordable generic medicines. The consequences for countries grappling with HIV/AIDS, is a disaster.

Decisions made at the World Trade Organisation on issues such as the patenting of seeds by global corporations, has had a major negative impact on the ability of small farmers to provide nutritious and safe food for their families and communities.

WOMEN ARE SCAPEGOATS

But we are not without power. The International Commission on the Future of Food, for example, has undertaken to "promote a transformation of the agro-food system through participatory democracy, knowledgeable consumer behaviour, socially responsible enterprises and independent nutritional education on the basis of guidelines for development that contribute to combating the erosion of agricultural biodiversity, chemical and genetic pollution and contamination and global warming of the planet and to work towards the reform of international rules for

food and agriculture, especially the regulations and standards of the WTO and FAO that are in conflict with the aforementioned principles.”

When people feel powerless because they are not able to control their circumstances, they often search for scapegoats. It is no surprise that women's bodies have become a battleground, with everyone from priests to husbands and traditional leaders attempting to assert control.

With the rise of religious fundamentalism we have seen a push for President Bush's policies of sexual abstinence, opposition to condom use and to the right to reproductive choice. Locally this has taken the form of a 'return' to virginity testing. HIV women and girls are blamed as the source of the disease and then are raped as the cure. The view of women as virgin-whore moves centre-stage.

Women of our country organised to influence the Constitution and to put large numbers of women into Parliament and other structures; to enact and adopt gender-responsive laws, policies and budgets; to establish institutions aimed at strengthening democracy such as the Constitutional Court, the Human Rights Commission and the Commission for Gender Equality. Yet these moves to equality have been undermined by global economic and trade agreements with which we have complied.

Members of the alliance, in Parliament and in government, remained silent and voted for these decisions. We became complicit by our actions and by our silence.

CAN WE BUILD POWER?

Against this background, we need to ask: Are we able to use our power in the interests of the poorest and most powerless? Can we harness

our collective power to transform our world?

In a chapter of my book, "Stand Up for our Lives in Love and Courage, A Story of Insubordination," I describe the decision to initiate public hearings by the Joint Monitoring Committee on Women at a time of silence on Mbeki's position on HIV/AIDS in the ANC Caucus. I wrote: "Even though we began at the height of the HIV/AIDS controversy, I was emboldened by the words of Nelson Mandela: 'If 27 years in prison have done anything to us, it is to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact upon the way people live and die...'"

One of the central features of patriarchal authoritarian systems is the way we stop thinking for ourselves and depend on the union or party leader, the expert, the husband or the priest. One of the most potent ways we can incite insubordination is to rebuild respect for ourselves and each other. We need to develop the clarity to make the connections clear and the courage to transform the power of hate, greed and fear that paralyses our hearts and our world.

It is easy to turn those we respect into saints or gods and glide over lessons we could learn from their weaknesses and the effort they made to develop themselves. In *Love and Courage, A Story of Insubordination* I quote Mandela in a letter from Robben Island in which he describes the daily meditation practice through which he kept his heart and soul intact.

In the mirror of ourselves we can experience the power of love which can evoke the courage to challenge the power of hate, greed and fear that permeates our hearts and minds and dominates our

institutions. In the mirror of our conscience and through being open to others reminding us when we forget, we can remember who we are and be inspired to powerful collective action.

I used a useful adult education exercise as a Cosatu educator with shop stewards and in the Workers' College in the 1980s. It emerged from an approach to education that asserted that as unionists and educators we do not 'develop people' as if they are empty vessels waiting to be filled with our wisdom. Instead our responsibility is to create conditions where people 'develop themselves'.

The exercise was a reflection on power and leadership through the metaphor of the mirror, where people, in pairs, silently moved their faces and bodies, in the most creative and humorous manner. They would take turns mirroring each other. We discussed this as an illustration that *we have the power to choose whom to follow and that every single one of us is able to lead.*

Neville Alcock, a worker leader wrote in the Workers' College publication in 1992, that he had changed his "perception of building power and how to use power. We must build power for the collective good, encourage individuals to develop and take responsibility for the running of our organisation - even if it means that those in power are sowing the seeds for others to take their place - we must not fear this." LB

Pregs Govender is the author of "Love and Courage, A Story of Insubordination." She is a former Cosatu unionist and served as an ANC MP from 1994 to 2002, when she resigned after being the only MP to oppose the arms-deal in the Defence Budget Vote.