

# Response to Ebrahim Harvey's

## 'Where is labour in water struggles?'

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Engaging with Ebrahim Harvey is difficult because his prejudices are untouched by facts. This is a great pity, for he raises important issues when drawing attention to the circumstance that neither Cosatu nor its public sector unions, especially the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) have been able to mount a sustained and effective campaign against any of the forms of commodification and commercialisation of water. The trouble is that Ebrahim overstates his case. Moreover, he adopts a stratagem that allows him to be unburdened by the evidence: he ignores or re-packages the troublesome facts.

Samwu can assess Harvey's method because we have directly and repeatedly informed him of his mistaken views about Samwu. We have provided him documents that demonstrate that Samwu is not the demon defined by his prejudices.

Thus, for instance, we first informed and then reminded him that Samwu's Cape Town branch played a prominent part in the successful joint union/community campaign against prepayment water meters.

Similarly, confronted with evidence of Samwu's national support for the campaign against the introduction of prepayment meters in Phiri, Soweto, he changes his complaint. The defaulting party is no longer Samwu but rather our Johannesburg branch! And he remains silent about the fact that in December 2003 Samwu commissioned a legal opinion on the constitutionality of prepayment

meters. However, before Samwu could act on this opinion and the strategy to which it gave rise, a strategy that included working with Cosatu, the Johannesburg Coalition against Water Privatisation launched its own legal challenge. Contrary to Ebrahim's assertions, Samwu supports this case and has declared its readiness to act as a friend of the court.

Drawing attention to Ebrahim's unfortunate manner of engagement does not mean that Samwu wishes to duck the essence of his critique. Unlike Ebrahim, who merely notes labour's failures, Samwu is ready to offer some understanding of its weaknesses on the water front. Samwu would like to offer the following general points for consideration.

Ebrahim seems to imply something sinister in the fact that Samwu has not delivered on its own water policies. We are hardly the first trade union, or organisation to experience that it is considerably easier to say the right things than to act on them! Contrary to Ebrahim, such a disconnection can have a multitude of causes that do not impugn the integrity of the union or organisation involved.

We can think of two causes that apply in our case.

First, both Samwu and Cosatu acknowledge that the alliance with the ANC has been at labour's expense. One way in which worker interests have lost out to those of capital's is when unions and/or specific branches or shop stewards, faced with a direct contradiction between government and union policy, have put loyalty to the government above their own class

needs. The commodification of water is an instance of the dilemma unionists face when confronted by such contradictions. Samwu, like Cosatu, is now re-assessing the Alliance. However, the outcome is by no means certain given the complexity of the issues and the deep-seated hope of changing the ANC to again give priority to the needs and aspirations of the working class (including the unemployed and otherwise poor).

Sectarianism amongst the left has played into the hands of unionists for whom the Alliance is sacrosanct. These left sectarians are vocal in attacking Cosatu and its affiliates. In their view, the ANC is the prime enemy; this makes Cosatu part of the enemy because of its formal alliance with the ANC. Unionists reluctant to work with 'civil society' in campaigns against government policies and/or ANC led municipalities therefore have a ready-made and plausible argument against such joint action. They merely draw attention to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of working with people and groups who make a virtue of attacks on Cosatu and its leadership.

Samwu does not of course think that these three points alone offer anything like an exhaustive analysis of why we have not been able to deliver on our radical policies on the universal provision of free, essential services, including water. It would be a nice, though a forlorn hope to expect such a comprehensive and nuanced analysis in Ebrahim's PhD thesis!

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