

Right 2 Work Campaign

A light in the tunnel

Unemployment vexes us at every turn but a gathering of diverse people in Cape Town provided some important pointers for attacking this scourge. **Peter Dwyer** gives an overview of issues discussed.

There are two deadly viruses eating away at the heart and soul of working class communities in South Africa: HIV/AIDS and unemployment. Despite the 'new denialism' of Thabo Mbeki and Trevor Manuel, South Africa's unemployment rate is 40%. Mass unemployment linked, as it is, with poverty undermines people's dignity and provides fertile conditions for the growth of crime, substance abuse and gender based violence. As such, in trying to understand the cause of these problems we need to remind ourselves that 'all roads lead to unemployment'.

Through an activist based approach the Right 2 Work (R2W) Campaign aims to engage policy makers and employers to support

legislation and action that can significantly reduce unemployment. Amongst other demands, the R2W seeks to get the right to work put in the constitution as a fundamental human right. In the process, we hope to forge solidarity between the unemployed and working people fortunate enough to be employed - the working poor.

For the past ten months we have been working with unemployed activists, who meet at least once a month at a R2W forum. They help to facilitate an economic literacy programme for people to understand the causes of unemployment and become more familiar with economic policy and ideas. In this way we hope to help create an open space in which unemployed (and employed) people can both educate and organise themselves.

UNDERSTANDING UNEMPLOYMENT

Consequently, a conference was held in June, 'South Africa's unemployment crisis: Overcoming unemployment - strategies for giving effect to the Right to Work', to bring together a diverse range of people and organisations. The aim was to learn and swap experiences about the causes and impact of mass unemployment in the context of neo-liberal globalisation and to raise the profile of the Campaign.

Of the 250 participants, 90 came from R2W forums across the country together with leading members of national trade unions,

the Young Communist League (YCL), the New Women's Movement and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC). The attendance also of members of faith-based organisations such as the Young Christian Workers (YCW), progressive researchers, academics and activists from Zimbabwe, India, Germany and France symbolised the broad based and non-sectarian approach that the R2W campaign seeks to build.

This was not a standard academic conference or talk shop but was aimed primarily at activists. Over three days and through 36 commission meetings, one concrete outcome was an initial platform document of demands for the campaign drawn up by a wide-range of people. This document is currently being discussed and amendments proposed in R2W forums.

The conference opened with two personal testaments of what it means to be an unemployed woman, by R2W activist Maneli Mkhize from Hammersdale near Durban and Susan Cairns, a retrenched clothing and textile worker, from Cape Town. After listening to them Jody Kollapan of the South African Human Rights Commission commented how the vision of the Constitution and the reality of the lives of millions of people dramatically differ. He reminded everyone that the origins of 'the right to work' could be located in the liberation movement



Tony Ehrenreich, Cosatu's Western Cape Regional Secretary



From left to right: Jody Kollaben, Vunani Bila and Tony Ehrenreich

and Clause 7 of the Freedom Charter and it is also endorsed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet the government has not ratified international legal covenants that include this right. Getting them to do so, he argued, would serve as a basis to advance that right and would enable popular mobilisation to make the state fulfil that right and justify some of their policies. He also gave the example of how a right to work may help protect some in the informal sector such as hawkers and beggars from being removed from the streets.

Laurent Garrouste a French activist and researcher provided the historical context for the rise in global unemployment. The impetus for neo-liberal policies began with the ongoing capitalist economic crisis which emerged in the 1970s and has resulted in a process of 'permanent restructuring of capital' to boost profits. In a discussion on contracting out and the casualisation of work, Jan Theron of the University of Cape Town gave very real examples of the 'devastating impact' of this process. Whilst acknowledging the existence of better labour laws since 1994, many loopholes still exist that business is only too willing to exploit and he cited the case of workers on temporary contracts for up to ten years.

The Campaign's importance was captured by Tony Ehrenreich, the

regional secretary of Cosatu in the Western Cape, who stated that, "For the first time we are starting to talk (about) ... a campaign that extends way beyond anything else we have contemplated before". He spoke of the urgency of creating jobs and providing some form of income support to those who, through no fault of their own, cannot find decent work. With workers having to stretch their income further to help unemployed family members, unemployment is like an extra tax on poor people. As such the fate and struggles of workers and the unemployed are connected. Using the government's own figures economist Ashgar Adelzadeh demonstrated how a greater proportion of the national income now goes to business and high income earners so leading to a widening of the gap between the rich and poor.

Jocelyn Vass of the Human Sciences Research Council and Vuyiseka Dubula of TAC discussed the impact of inequality and the lack of jobs on women and those living with HIV/AIDS. Vass pointed out that although the number of people who are too discouraged to look for work increased between 2001 and 2005 the government does not count them as unemployed. Yet the majority of these 'non-people' are young women between the ages of 20 and 29. Dubula explained how unemployment and HIV/AIDS have

become allies and the target of that alliance is the poor and the vulnerable. With a health system in crisis and a lack of antiretrovirals social and health care is effectively privatised as families often shoulder the burden.

RESPONDING TO INADEQUATE GOVERNMENT POLICY

Other sessions evaluated the government's responses to unemployment. Margaret Legum told how GEAR contributed to unemployment and that ASGISA was no solution to it as government still relies on the private sector to create enough jobs and this was not working. Anna McCord of the University of Cape Town who has spent several years researching the public works programme argued that the Expanded Public Works Programme "... is not creating 1 million jobs, it is inadequate and will not enhance people skills and in no way is it a policy instrument in addressing mass unemployment." Charles Meth of the University of KwaZulu Natal pointed to the inadequacy of social grants in lifting people out of poverty.

The conference moved on to discuss the basis for popular strategies to combat unemployment. Whilst it is clear liberal democracy has extended political rights, social rights, such as unemployment and welfare provision, are grossly inadequate and are undermined by neo-liberal

inspired policies. Dot Keet of AIDC mapped some of the basic principles for a different approach that would be 'integrated and interrelated' and 'would not be market driven'. Many speakers and participants talked of the urgent need to employ more people in an expanded public sector creating labour intensive jobs for such people as nurses, teachers and social workers.

Taking up a theme echoed by Charles Meth and Tony Ehrenreich, Werner Steinbach of ATTAC in Germany explained the need for, and uses of, a guaranteed basic income grant. An important component of this is that it would reduce the pressure on people to accept the part-time and casual jobs highlighted in earlier discussions. This would also weaken the grip of the labour market that dominates all our lives. Building on his earlier theme of how the rich have increased their wealth since 1994, Ashgar Adelzadeh discussed how we could create decent work (as well as fund income grants through changing fiscal policy, spending priorities and raising tax on business and the rich - that has been massively reduced since 1994) and by cutting government subsidies to the private sector.

BUILDING ALTERNATIVES THROUGH UNITY

The final one and half days explored the role of popular mobilisations and demands of the Campaign. Vinod Raina an activist from a similar campaign in India told how the Indian government was forced, through extensive popular mobilisations, lobbying and research, to introduce the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005). This guarantees 100 days work a year or an unemployment allowance per rural household. This

and the commission discussions about the possibility of formulating a South African employment and income guarantee scheme generated much excitement amongst participants and it has been resolved that a network of researchers and activists will be set up to explore this.

A common reason given for the need for such guarantees is that the market is unable to provide jobs but also, importantly, that the unemployed are not to blame for their situation. Unemployment is socially created and can only be solved socially through collective action. As such, the unemployed are not part of an 'underclass' sealed in a so-called 'second economy' but are the result of capitalist development in South Africa.

More widely, the existence of a large pool of unemployed people living in insecure and unstable conditions is nothing new but is a basic characteristic of capitalist development. The social and political effect of this 'reserve army of labour' is to hold down wages. This downward pressure on wages increases job insecurity and the use of part-time and temporary workers act as a control over labour. Consequently, these processes weaken the position of workers and provide the basis for racism and xenophobia. This makes it harder for workers to fight back and also allows others to play the 'divide and rule' card as was alluded to by some members of government during Cosatu strike action last year.

Therefore, a victory for workers is a victory for the unemployed and vice-versa. Any worker's campaign on unemployment must strive to make links with unemployed people, otherwise it will become a sectional and narrow campaign that disregards them. Practically this

means simple things like ensuring the unemployed can get on free transport for marches. Sections of the unemployed have already demonstrated their commitment to campaigning, as they are members of the TAC, Abahlali baseMjondolo and the YCW. With 5 million HIV-positive, 8 million unemployed and several million working in the informal sector unity of purpose and unity in action is essential.

This cannot be done through special pleading but only through working together can we begin to break new ground. This sentiment and the spirit of left unity permeated the whole conference and was captured by Ashwin Desai who, in reflecting on the conference, commented that it represented 'one of those all too rare moments in South Africa. The broad left shared platforms and found a commonality of purpose'.

The power of the labour movement has always been, and will always be, power to mobilise action backed by strong campaigns and popular education with workers at the centre. But in a country with long-term structural unemployment hanging over the labour movement like a smoking gun, it is vital that the issue of unemployment and mobilising and organising the unemployed become a central campaign of the labour movement and the broad left. The public endorsement of the campaign and the adoption of its key demands by the YCL has set an exemplary challenge to other progressive organisations in civil society to look beyond their specific constituency and build links with the unemployed.

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