

The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee does size count?



The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) has emerged as a small but significant organisation of protest. While focused on a limited issue – provision of affordable (where possible free) electricity to the poor of Soweto – SECC links access to services to criticism of globalisation and advocacy for democratic socialism. **Anthony Egan and Alex Wafer** argue that the SECC has had an impact on South African society precisely through its ability to network with likeminded organisations and activists.

The technologies that make the globalisation of capital possible also make possible the worldwide resistance movement that has emerged. It gives small social movement organisations like the SECC a global profile that belies its size and relative parochialism.

The SECC and its allied organisations have chosen as their site of struggle essential services provision, in particular privatisation of essential services and the stress on cost recovery. Researchers Eberhard and Van Horen (1995) stressed the importance of equity, energy conservation and the need for state involvement in development, particularly in state provision of essential services. Beyond the question of equity, they saw lack of access to energy, particularly electricity, as environmentally detrimental and dangerous to human well-being: people were forced to use wood as fuel in many areas (leading to deforestation) and paraffin was both poisonous and ran the high risk of fires. Extensive electrification was the most practical solution. Strict market economics had failed to provide adequate energy services so the state had to intervene to prevent market failures and 'to achieve greater equity in access to desirable energy services'. In brief, energy had to be cheap. With the demise of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the implementation of such a proposal ended. Millions of homes of the disadvantaged were electrified, but adequate quantities of free or very cheap electricity were not forthcoming, despite election promises.

In Johannesburg, following its 1997 budget crisis and blaming it on bloated administration, duplicated functions, waste and R2-billion in unpaid utility bills, the Metropolitan Council produced a plan to reorganise services into self-contained 'utilities' companies (like City Power) that

would have to make themselves financially viable. The plan, called Igoli 2002, met almost immediate reactions – ranging from enthusiasm, through critical support to outright condemnation.

Two conflicting understandings of human development emerge here. Some studies, while acknowledging the difficulties the poor had in paying for energy, rejected the notion of energy subsidies, arguing that it would push electricity prices up 50%, and that Eskom by 2000 had succeeded in reducing the real price of electricity by 15%. Crucially, they ignored whether the poor could actually afford to pay the existing prices, even if they were in fact cheaper. This point was raised time and again by critics of energy policy who argued that energy costs were simply too high for the poor, and that the policy of cut-offs, whether of water or electricity, was a human disaster undermining sustainable development. The problems within electricity policy were highlighted: cut-offs of basic services in various parts of the country, the poor being forced to pay more for electricity than the wealthy and big business; a range of diseases and even fatalities as a result of the cut-off policies; environmental pollution; and various forms of resistance by the poor. In a controversial HSRC research report drawing on case studies from around the country, the authors concluded that the inability to pay for services beyond the means of the majority of South Africans had reached crisis point.

Consumers tended to demonise Eskom and regarded the ANC and the pro-ANC South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco) as allies of Eskom and irrelevant to their struggles. In this context, new social movements like the SECC emerged.

EMERGENCE OF SECC

Political opportunity takes on many shapes and forms. At the time of the second democratic general election of 1999 and the

municipal elections of 2000 Trevor Ngwane was dismissed from his post as a councillor in Pimville, Soweto (and subsequently left the ANC) for his opposition to the planned Igoli 2002 municipal reforms that he regarded as socially unacceptable. He helped run a series of workshops on the energy crisis. The 'crisis' was summed up as follows:

- contrary to the 'culture of non-payment' rhetoric of the media, most Sowetans could not pay their electricity bills;
- about 89% of households were (to varying degrees) in arrears;
- electricity cut-offs (reaching a rate of 20 000 households per month in 2001) were occurring, leading to health, safety and human risks, not to mention damage to small businesses;
- many Sowetans felt that energy supply conditions under Eskom were worse than five years before;
- the ANC had failed to deliver on its election promise of 'free electricity', many Sowetans (perhaps 40%) saying the ANC had lied;
- most Sowetans favoured a standardised 'flat rate' electricity charge. In 2001 SECC advocated a rate of R50 per month.

SECC's founding members came from various political backgrounds, but all were disillusioned with the ANC and searching for a mechanism to confront a new set of political and socio-economic realities. The Soweto workshops were followed by a series of protests arranged around the Urban Futures conference held at Wits University in June 2000, and it is here that these founding members met with a group of academics, including radical economist Patrick Bond, and staff at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS), relationships which have been maintained, and have also helped forge the public profile of SECC. Another organisation, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), emerged as an umbrella body for a network of new social movement organisations (SMOs). The SECC became one of the most active members of the APF, helping organise anti-privatisation and other demonstrations against symbols of the global capitalist order, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and the Iraq Occupation.

EARLY CAMPAIGNS

The decision of Eskom to go ahead with aggressive 'cost recovery' in Soweto led to the SECC decision to combine protest action with illegal reconnections. Eskom insisted that it could not cover the losses it incurred through Soweto residents defaulting on electricity payments: the debts simply had to be collected. With equal vehemence, the SECC insisted that most Soweto residents simply could not pay their debts, a claim that Queen's University Municipal Services Project survey backed up with startling evidence. Based on a survey conducted in households in Pimville and Orlando East, it found that 62% of the main breadwinners in homes were either pensioners (40%) or unemployed (22%) and that 40% of households had a family income of less than R1 000 per month.

Soweto residents also resented the perceived haphazard and unjust manner in which Eskom conducted itself. Many received two electricity bills a month, one from the local council and another from Eskom's head office. Others received bills for electricity they had not used, since they had already been cut off or had never been connected, with Eskom officials allegedly taking bribes from residents not to cut them off if they fell into arrears, or to illegally reconnect them for R1 000. Where cut-offs occurred they were frequently of whole areas, not discriminating between those who paid their bills and those who did not. Business people complained that the cut-offs were ruining their businesses; even clinics were cut off. ANC local councillors seemed unable or unwilling to do anything. This unwillingness, according to SECC members, seems to have included hostility to anyone organising resistance – a point often made is that the ANC seemed to regard any and all organising as their sole prerogative.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) launched a withering attack on the Department of Public Enterprises and its proposed steamrolling of electricity privatisation (through the Eskom Conversion Bill). Pointing out that this 'restructuring' would cause the cost of electricity to rise by between 22% and 50%, they accused the department of acting in bad faith and renegeing on the ANC electoral promises of free electricity. SECC deputy chairperson

Virginia Setshedi was more blunt in her condemnation: 'Instead of uplifting our lives, government is taking us (down)'.

Eskom denied that its cut-offs were indiscriminate and that its billing was incorrect – though it agreed to introduce a new, more streamlined billing process. Though it acknowledged isolated cases of corruption, which it had dealt with most severely, it insisted that these were isolated. In short, debts had to be repaid. There would be no compromise.

OPERATION KHANYISA: ILLEGAL RECONNECTIONS

In response SECC launched 'Operation Khanyisa' ('switch on'): illegal reconnection of houses by trained local members at no charge. Within six months, SECC had reconnected over 3 000 households. The SECC re-connectors did not discriminate between SECC members and non-members, between rich and poor: one re-connector even claims to have re-connected Moroka Police Station. Over the years, reconnection has taken on a high degree of sophistication.

In October 2001, Eskom announced a moratorium on cut-offs. On 30 November, Minister of Public Enterprise Jeff Radebe had spoken at a gathering at Eskom's headquarters where he stressed the importance of electricity for development, South African citizens' need for it and the problems of its cost for those who were poor. He noted public concern about the billing process and recommended changes in this regard. In the middle of the speech, however, he launched a direct attack on SECC, calling them part of a 'criminal culture' and accusing them of having a radical anti-ANC agenda. Radebe then proposed what was in effect a compromise: punishment of Eskom's own illegal re-connectors, reform of the billing process and 'normalisation' of the electricity crisis through an amnesty for those who reported illegal reconnections and a willingness to set aside 50% of the residents' arrears. He framed this proposal in terms of what he saw as his 'twin responsibilities' – 'to protect the interests of both the community and Eskom'.

When Radebe made his offer to Soweto in December 2001 it was turned down. SECC

made its demands clear: electricity for everyone, including urban settlements and rural areas that still had to be electrified; scrapping all arrears; the free basic supply of electricity and water the ANC had promised during the 2000 municipal elections campaign and a return to the flat-rate monthly pricing system that the community had managed to wrest from the apartheid regime in the 1980s.

In early 2002, SECC attacked President Thabo Mbeki's call for unemployed youth to become volunteers in their communities, particularly police reservists. SECC members had long been volunteers, re-connecting residents' electricity. 'The difference between Mbeki's volunteers and SECC volunteers is that if you volunteer for the SECC you are serving the working class community. Mbeki asks you to volunteer but he and his ministers get fat salaries each month. Tomorrow Mbeki's volunteers will be sent to attack the community, they will arrest you if you re-connect electricity for our grannies, they will escort the sheriff when he comes to evict you from your house.'

New alliances were formed with progressive labour movements (particularly the SA Municipal Workers Union) in the wake of the 2001 general strike. The movement also saw its task to participate in wider struggles over water ('Operation Vulamanzini') and housing ('Operation Buyel'ekhaya') – in short 'when the ANC government fails to deliver we must deliver where it is possible'.

THE K87: A DEFINING MOMENT?

The SECC made world headlines when, on 6 April 2002, a charter bus of nearly 100 members, many of them pensioners, arrived at the mayor of Johannesburg Amos Masondo's Kensington home to present a petition titled 'Fire the Mayor, fire the Councillors' and protest against power cuts. Masondo was away at the time. When the crowd tried to disconnect the mayor's electricity, an altercation with bodyguards turned into a minor riot. According to Masondo's spokesperson, the crowd tried to trash the property and shots were fired by a bodyguard that wounded two people. Police arrested 87 people after the incident, including SECC leader Trevor Ngwane and South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) organiser Rob Rees.

While the ANC government and opposition Democratic Alliance agreed (for once!) that the demonstration deserved condemnation, smaller parties like the United Democratic Movement (UDM) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) saw the incident as an understandable, if regrettable, result of government's failure to fulfil its electoral promises of access to power for the poor. Samwu also condemned the state's handling of the incident, as did many local and global activist groups.

Through the Internet, socialist and broader anti-globalisation groups called on their members to express their solidarity with the 'Kensington 87' (or K87) and lobby the SA government for their speedy release. Released on bail from Diepkloof Prison a few days later – the official reason, delays in verifying the addresses of the accused, being seen by their supporters as nothing more than a pretext for harassing the K87 further – the trial dragged on for almost a year. On 5 March 2003 the case was dismissed; the court ruled that the testimony of Masondo's bodyguard was unreliable, self-contradictory and incredible. If anything his actions had probably caused most of the disturbance. From first to last, it was seen as an example of the way the ANC used its power against grassroots activists opposed to its cynical, anti-poor attitudes.

For its part, SECC and its allies used the trial and publicity as a vehicle to communicate its anti-privatisation, anti-cut offs message to a wider public. After his release on bail, Ngwane reaffirmed SECC's commitment to hold the ANC to its 2000 election promises of free water and electricity for the poor. He announced that SECC would continue its marches, protests, boycotts and illegal reconnections of electricity in Soweto that it had initiated in 'Operation Khanyisa' in 2001. He stressed that 'the rich' should be charged for utilities, not poor people, particularly pensioners.

BEYOND THE K87: GROWTH AND DIVERSIFICATION OF STRUGGLE

Whatever its grassroots members perceived – and many seem to have been focused quite narrowly on service provisions, inability to pay and hence inability to live a decent human life – the SECC leadership saw its role as part of a wider political mobilisation and tried consistently to involve rank and file in the

'bigger picture'. Members were sent to workshops and attempts were made to educate residents about globalisation and privatisation. Members were sent to big meetings like the Durban World Conference Against Racism (WCAR); SECC met with the Westcliff Residents Association and the Dalit Peoples' Movement of India in Chatsworth to share their experiences of poverty and struggle, and participated in an eviction protest. The big event, however, was the August 31 march in Durban, in which SECC participated. A number of marches occurred during the WCAR, some with official sanction. This march did not have official approval and was almost stopped – but it went ahead and dwarfed in numbers the others, an event that would be repeated at the Johannesburg WSSD the following year.

The WSSD – dubbed the W\$\$\$D by the activists – generated a range of involvement and conflict over what precisely constituted sustainable development. Representatives from the global resistance community, many of whom had been to Porto Alegre in 2001, gathered at the University of the Witwatersrand for a conference of the International Forum on Globalisation (IFG). The social movements complained that the Summit had in effect been hijacked by states whose policies made service provisions to the poor unsustainable. Ngwane proposed a march to the newly named Johannesburg Central Police Station (formerly the notorious John Vorster Square) on 24 August 2002, but police stun grenades dispersed the crowd. Legal battles also erupted over a proposed march to the WSSD conference in Sandton from Alexandra township. It proceeded on 31 August amidst a heavy police presence.

In 2003 SECC took its activism even further, removing and destroying pre-paid meters in Soweto. They also started to expand their campaign to include all basic services – water, housing, healthcare, transport and education, with forays into protests against rising food prices. SECC organised a mass meeting to warn Soweto residents about the new Eskom 'card system' and prepaid meters, as well as protest activities and meetings over the Johannesburg Water policies particularly in Phiri.

Faced with protest Eskom backed down considerably in May 2003, writing off R1.4-

billion of debt accrued. Claimed by Sanco as its victory, one gained by levelheaded negotiations rather than protest, most observers seem to see it as a victory for the tactics of SECC.

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANISATION

The SECC has a diverse membership, with varying degrees of commitment to the organisation:

- core activists, some of them no longer holding official positions of leadership in SECC;
- the (mostly young male) illegal re-connectors who make themselves available to go out into the community and illegally re-connect electricity supplies
- rank and file SECC members (many of them elderly women, the 'grannies of Soweto') who participate in the various branches, some of them holding positions on the executive, take part in the occasional marches and protests, and frequently get sent on training workshops organised in conjunction with SECC partner organisations.

At the heart of SECC is a small core of activists. Although most office bearers are elected yearly, and include many newer members, the founding members still maintain a large degree of influence in the leadership structure. Not formally its chairperson, and having no official office, in fact not even a card-carrying member of the organisation, Ngwane is nevertheless often regarded as de-facto leader.

In terms of the day-to-day running of the SECC offices at the Careers Centre in Soweto, a small group arrange meetings, compile pamphlets (which they distribute to the local branches via the branch chair) and speak on behalf of its members. Apart from attending branch meetings, and the occasional mass rallies, the branch members are scarcely involved in the other aspects of the SECC.

APF and Keep Left activist Claire Cerruti has called SECC a 'mini-mass movement'. Her description sums up one of the fundamental problems of analysing SECC: its size. Given the fluidity of SECC's membership structures it is impossible to accurately gauge its size.

The best-case scenario for 'membership' might be between 1 600 and 3 200 members



If half the branches are inactive or have a handful of members, the numbers might drop to about 1 000 active members. There is a realistic understanding that involvement in SECC fluctuates according to its level of campaigning, which from the evidence seems to suggest waxing and waning cycles of protest.

SECC operates within a network of associate organisations (Keep Left, Landless Peoples' Movement, etc) under the coordinating banner of the APF. Other grassroots groups openly align themselves with SECC, like the Tembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC) and the Small Farms Water Crisis Committee, who regard themselves as partners. They have largely emerged in response to the same concerns: evictions, service delivery and cut-offs, with no official membership structure. They wield no power yet try to fight for their community. The TCC is but one, localised, example of groups that stretch from Cape Town to Nelspruit fighting cost recovery programmes, advocating affordable utilities and demanding state recognition of poor communities that find themselves loosely 'aligned' to SECC, many of them through the 'network umbrella' of the APF. This networking is not simply within South Africa but linked to the anti-globalisation resistance community. Although SECC is small and poor, it has received global coverage through its leaders' participation in a range of international forums.

Ngwane's leadership has been crucial to SECC's growth. Though no longer an office holder (or card-carrying member) of the movement, his critical intellect has been

crucial to link particular issues like access to electricity, water and education to the wider struggles against the World Bank and IMF. Internationally he is the voice of SECC at anti-globalisation functions; domestically, he is often one of the most creative tactical innovators, drawing on popular culture and struggle history to both educate members and engage in protest actions. His reputation as a renegade ANC member has also helped considerably. Yet as an outspoken former ANC leader in bad standing with the government and party, Ngwane's presence may in fact heighten existing conflicts. In contrast to a leader like Zackie Achmat of the Treatment Action Committee (TAC), who still has standing with ANC leaders and who thus can mobilise TAC to combine negotiation, legal action and protest, Ngwane's maverick status puts SECC without the pale.

Another structural problem is that apart from the SECC leadership and the illegal re-connectors who are mostly young men, there are few youth active at the branch level. Many Soweto youth seem 'apolitical' or 'depoliticised'. Even for those youth who are more politically conscious, the bread and butter issues of the branch level members, such as evictions and electricity cut-offs do not capture the imagination, as do more personal aspirations like mobility.

The majority of SECC members are middle aged to elderly women. Yet this is seldom reflected in the profile of the leadership. These old ladies certainly chair some of the branches, but apart from Mam'Kwashu, who is the officer for the SECC Veterans, and the much younger Virginia Setshedi, the profile of

the SECC leadership belies the overwhelming majority of older women in its ranks. The old ladies, the 'grannies', are certainly taken seriously by the organisation. It conducts its meetings in vernacular languages that they understand, rather than English, which is seen as an 'elite' language, the language of the ANC, Sanco, local councillors and their supporters, but there remains an element of male domination in SECC.

ACTIVISM IN THE SECC

The first level has been illegal reconnection. Beyond the numbers of reconnections, which are significant in themselves, has been the degree to which reconnection has been a means of mobilising support. SECC re-connectors maintain strict professionalism and integrity with respect to their work, not least because part of the performance of their work, the theatre or spectacle of the re-connection, is about extending the solidarity and support of SECC. As one connector said, 'you learn not to do it in the dark... everybody must see who was there... don't hide yourself. Such civil disobedience seen by the state as criminality, part of SECC's repertoire of contention, was (and remains) also about maintaining SECC's public profile, so that others could see what they were doing, and crucially that those who were being re-connected could see that the SECC were there to help.

Not charging for the service was prudent politics and in keeping with the ideological underpinnings of the SECC. Its allies on the left agreed. The Democratic Socialist Movement, for example, called Operation Khanyisa a justifiable act of self-defence summed up in the slogan 'It's better to break the law than to break the poor'.

In areas where knowledge of SECC is limited, the re-connectors have often found hostility from local residents. In areas where they are well known, like Phiri and Chiawelo, the re-connectors are widely regarded as heroes. On the other hand, the hostility that some experience may explain why SECC has little presence in other areas.

The second level of mobilisation through contestation draws on mobilising protest by rank and file SECC members, whether directly related to cut-offs or broadly related to anti-privatisation and anti-globalisation. These activities include protest marches usually

undertaken with allied SMOs (the Sandton march) or protests against councillors (the K87 incident).

At a third level, mobilisation has been linked to ongoing training and exposure of new activists to broader national and international issues. This seems to have the dual purpose of drawing in new members and broadening their ideological vision from the local to the national and global. Since not everyone can be a re-connector to sustain interest and involvement people's capacities need to be stimulated.

CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

The distinctive SECC T-shirt, uncannily and possibly deliberately, resembles the SACP/Cosatu T-shirt. Music and songs at rallies bear a strong family resemblance to the struggle period, as do many of the techniques of contentious action. This attempt to reconfigure the struggle may be seen as a critique of the ANC and may backfire on SECC by further alienating it from sympathetic elements within the tripartite alliance.

Another striking cultural element in SECC's grassroots membership, as indeed in other SMOs and social movements, is religion. Although there seems at least to be a split – between the largely secular leadership and the devoutly religious 'grannies' – the discourse of SECC seems at times as much driven by religion as by socialism or anti-globalisation: branch meetings usually begin with prayers, hymns are interspersed with 'struggle' songs and many grassroots activists express their anger at their conditions, as well as their sense of enthusiasm for SECC, in religious terms.

Although by its own admission pursuing the 'dream of socialism, a society where the working class owns and controls the wealth and means of producing... wealth', SECC's ideology is in fact far more complex. This is not surprising, given the diversity of its membership. Some SECC figures and their associates have a background in the Marxist Workers' Tendency, while others seem closer to Anarcho-Syndicalism. None, however, seem to dominate the discourse, much of which seems to be rooted in notions of economic rights and the South African Constitution.

The ideological tone of the AGM, manifested in the 2004 AGM Chairperson's

Report, must thus be seen as reflecting the position of the leadership and core activists. Its tenor and content sets itself within the anti-globalising 'new left'.

Interestingly, the chairperson's report, having savaged 'bourgeois politics' argued that, once SECC and other movements built up a solid political base in Soweto, a shift to participation in elections might occur. This would be a new direction for SECC and APF – direct participation in the 'bourgeois' political process, and a great risk. Could it succeed? On its own, probably not; but with a 'New Left' possibly emerging out of the ANC (sections of the SACP, and Cosatu) this new party might offer a radical alternative.

CONCLUSION

SECC is effective insofar as it has influenced a partial debt write-off by Eskom and by its example has spawned a series of actions across the country. The key question is, however, whether SECC will be able to compensate for lack of resources with creative strategy so as to have a major impact on South African society. In the short term, one must be sober and admit that given its localisation, limited resources and small number of committed activists SECC's impact seems limited. If anything, as it diversifies into a wider range of issues, as it has in the last year or so, one must wonder when its human and tactical resources will be spent.

SECC has certainly caught the attention of government and the ANC at local level. Though the government has denounced the movement as criminals, the ANC at the grassroots has perhaps taken closer note. The ANC has, at least semi-officially, noted the need to revive Sanco as a community-based lobbying organisation, revitalise ANC and SACP branches and encourage local councillors to be seen to be 'delivering' lest SECC, APF and its associates consider entering directly into the realm of contesting local council elections.

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