

# “We need union support in one united, collective struggle” Trevor Ngwane on social movements

In an interview with **Ebrahim Harvey**, an independent political writer, **Trevor Ngwane** of the Anti-Privatisation Front discusses the strengths, weaknesses and future of South Africa’s social movements.

**O**peration Khanyisa Movement won only one seat in the Johannesburg municipality in the local government elections this year.

*What happened?*

We didn't do that badly. It was the first time we participated in local government elections and we also had time and financial constraints. Because of these we didn't aim to win many wards. We mainly wanted to highlight the main issues facing poor communities around basic services.

*What can be achieved with just one seat in Johannesburg?*

Our representative is able to make certain interventions and continue to raise the issues regarding basic services and other aspects of local government.

*You have spoken about the need for a mass workers' party in South Africa. Is that still your goal, and was the election a step towards it?* Certainly. Only such a party can address the needs and interests of the working class. At the moment no party is really advancing such interests.

*Can social movements build such a party without the support of trade unions like Cosatu?*

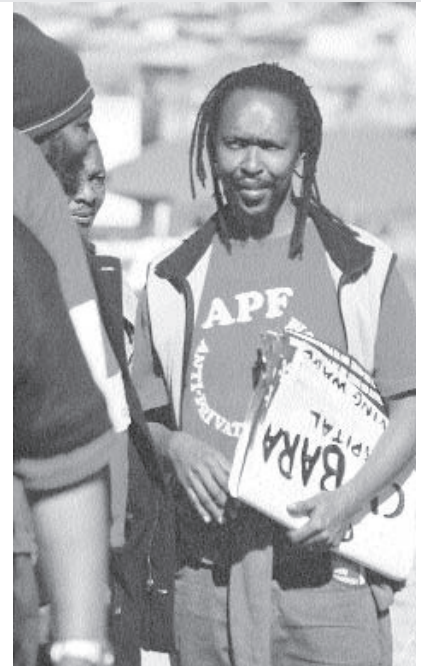
Certainly not. Labour remains key to the workers' party idea.

*What are the biggest weaknesses of the social movements?*

We tend to think we are bigger and more powerful than we really are, but we have huge potential to grow into a powerful political force. Also, we do not have strong links with trade unions, which is perhaps the biggest weakness. Thirdly, we are mainly local-based groups and lack a national presence.

*And the biggest strengths?*

We are raising issues which deal with the daily lives of people, such as basic services. This is the main reason we have grown. We also have many young members who are dedicated to changing the lives of poor people and eager to learn. Many of us can see that our struggles and the unfulfilled needs of the poor majority are linked to political power, which is what we need to achieve to bring about the necessary changes. We are very aware that community struggles



alone will not win our main demands and that we need to unite with workers in the factories.

*Is the Left's only serious option a Brazilian-style mass workers' party, which will contest national and local elections?*

Absolutely, that's our main aim. In some instances we are beginning to link up with the struggles of workers, like trying to give support

to the Checker's strike. We need to do a lot of work to get to that point, but we're confident it's the right route.

*Given the many township-based community struggles over the past two years, can social movements win broad working class support in these communities?*

Yes, there is great potential because everyone is affected by basic services. But we won't get very far without winning the support of workers in trade unions who live in the townships.

*Can struggles for basic services in the townships, like water and sanitation, energise a broader working class struggle?*

Yes, the working class comes home to these problems every day. So we need organisationally to make the connections which exist in real life. But again we'll need union support in one united and collective struggle. Workers must support their brothers and sisters in the townships and use their experience of organisation to strengthen community struggles. It is one indivisible struggle.

*Has the commercialisation of basic services become so embedded in our social policy framework that struggles cannot be separated from a struggle against the government itself?*

Yes, it is one struggle because these policies are wrong. So we need also to change the regime, especially when all our efforts to get it to change these policies in favour of the working class and poor have failed. The ruling party has fiercely fought against these

struggles and tried to suppress them. That shows how incompatible our needs and demands are with their policies. We need a new government that will adopt policies in the interests of the poor majority.

*Cosatu does not seem involved in township struggles for better basic services. Even the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) has not been very active against pre-paid water meters, although they have a national resolution condemning them. Why?*

It is Samwu's right wing which is trying to prevent the union from supporting our struggles and even their own resolutions. Some changes are taking place, but rather slowly. Many people in the unions are beginning to see the role played by these people.

*Social movements are sometimes accused of reckless adventurism and unguided militancy, which have played into the state's hands. Is that fair?*

Yes, we went through that stage, but we learnt from our mistakes.

*How can you learn without making mistakes? Do you foresee any changes in Cosatu's attitude towards social movements, so that they can work together?*

It has already started happening. The SEEC (Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee) was invited by Cosatu to their congress in September. They are beginning to realise that we need to support each other, otherwise all our struggles will have serious weaknesses and we won't win our demands.



*There have been indications of internal divisions in the APF. Are there?*

Every organisation sooner or later develops internal differences, but the SECC is focusing on building our organisation on the ground. This is where our strength lies. Internal squabbles can sap energy and divert attention from building the organisation. We have opted for door-to-door organising and campaigning – the hard and sacrificing work necessary for building organisation and mass support.

*Why did you give up your post in the APF and take up the position of organiser for the SECC?*

The Socialist Group, which I belong to, decided to place me in this position because we want to rather focus on building organisation and be closer to what is happening on the ground. It was a strategic decision which is working out well.

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