

Where is labour in water struggles?

The provision of water to poor households is a hotly contested topic.

Ebrahim Harvey

discusses problems with the state's water policies and laments trade unions' lack of involvement in water struggles.



Ironically, since the watershed 1994 democratic elections and the adoption of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) by the African National Congress-led government this country has seen an increasing commercialisation and commodification of water supply in black working class communities. In fact just six months after the elections new water legislation made cost recovery imperative.

Poor black communities, awaiting major changes to their lives after long suffering the devastation racial capitalism spawned, were instead often urged to be self-reliant and responsible.

As early as this the RDP promise of 25 litres of water per person per day (PPPD) over the short term of one to two years and 50-60 litres PPPD over the medium term of two to five years was threatened. Though the RDP was widely recognised as the programme of the new ANC government, it took seven years before, in 2001, 25 litres of water PPPD or 6 000 litres per household per month was supplied. The 25 litres PPPD was based on a household of eight ($8 \times 25 \text{ l} = 200 \text{ l}$ per day $\times 30 \text{ days a month} = 6 000 \text{ litres}$). If the household was bigger than eight then naturally per capita consumption would be even less than the paltry 25 litres

PPPD. As against a 6 000 litre lifeline today for poor households consumption in former white suburbia was, and still is, between 45 000 and 60 000 litres.

This tiny 'lifeline' of 25 litres PPPD is miserably inadequate, especially for black working class households, which have historically been larger than those of white households.

Furthermore, commentators make it clear that adequate supplies of water are central to poverty eradication and to development, especially against the background of the apartheid legacy. They also make it clear that unlike electricity water has no substitutes and that a lack of it can

cause various diseases and ill-health, especially for children. All in all water is the most vitally important basic service, especially for poor families.

Though we have a lifeline in this country, which is undoubtedly an advance on the past, it is so small and inadequate that I argue that we can confidently talk of the substantive commodification of water.

WHERE ARE THE UNIONS?

Thus far Cosatu and in fact all trade unions, and the South African Communist Party (SACP), have seriously neglected basic services in townships. But union members are involved in the production of both water and electricity. Instead social movements, such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and the Coalition Against Water Privatisation (CAWP), have spearheaded the struggle against the commercialisation and commodification of water in black working class townships, in which members of Cosatu also reside.

Cosatu and its affiliates, including unions one would expect to be more involved, such as the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) and the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), have been conspicuous by their absence.

A key question to Samwu is why it has hardly been active in the struggles against prepaid water meters when it has a congress resolution against them. In the heated battles fought in Phiri, Soweto when these meters were installed in 2003, Samwu was nowhere to be seen. No, the Johannesburg branch did not even issue a press statement in support of those struggles which resulted

in the arrest of several activists. And though these meters had serious health implications Nehawu was also nowhere to be seen. Cosatu itself was in no way involved in these struggles. The SACP also offered no support.

This is unfortunate because Samwu is the majority union at Johannesburg Water (JW), the company responsible for installing prepaid meters. It is Samwu which should have been in the forefront of the struggle. This is even more unfortunate because the failure to stop the installation of meters in Phiri has spurred JW and the City of Johannesburg to roll them out in the rest of Soweto.

There is every reason to believe that had these unions actively supported these struggles the outcome in Phiri, for example, might have been different. Rather than face a defeat in Phiri, the prepaid project could have been postponed or set aside. The problem in their stance is that it does not save members of Cosatu affiliates who live in Phiri from the adverse consequences of prepaid water meters. No, they face the same situation all other residents face, when in fact a united struggle could have led to a different outcome, to the benefit of all.

In short, when social movements should be the natural class allies of union members, these divisions and lack of solidarity negatively affects the entire class. These union members are the family of those 'water warriors' in the townships.

The unions' perception may also be that because social movements have been at the forefront of the struggles for the decommodification of basic services, and have acquired

organisational experience in this regard, to lend support is to strengthen their hand, which the political logic of the ANC alliance would want to resist.

Water's powerful living and cultural significance and symbolism is so great that the failure to elicit the support of labour in community struggles is a counter-productive reality for the entire working class and labour movement. It would not be an exaggeration to state that if unions and social movements cannot unite to fight for water in poor communities, this is the starkest manifestation of deep political polarisation. This polarisation is politically manipulated because the unions' lack of solidarity is not because they support the commercialisation and commodification of water. No, they don't provide support in spite of their policy opposition.

If unions are not concerned with the restrictive conditions of access to water, disconnections and the subsequent deprivation, misery and health risks townships face it is a sad moment for the labour movement. But more than this, their abstentionist and indifferent stance strengthens the hand of capital and neoliberal governments, who are able to entrench disempowering and depriving approaches. The other problem is that it will be very difficult to reverse setbacks and defeats. This appears to be the situation today in Phiri, where demoralisation and despair, following their reluctant surrender to prepaid meters, is evident.

UPCOMING CASE AGAINST PREPAID METERS

This legal case, a class action challenging the constitutionality of

prepaid meters and the sufficiency of the present lifeline of 6 kilolitres is a hugely important and precedent-setting case. It is launched by a few residents of Phiri, with the assistance of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies and the Freedom of Expression Institute. But thus far neither Cosatu nor its affiliates, have expressed support. It is possible that some Cosatu affiliates and members are unaware of this case because the official leadership has not bothered to raise it in their structures. Joining the case as amicus would have provided a powerful impetus to the prospects for a legal victory and may have helped to reignite the subdued struggles on the ground.

If the case is won, as it was in the United Kingdom, it could lead to the banning of prepaid water meters in the country. The case would have far-reaching constitutional consequences for water supply, social policy, social movements and all levels of government. However, one thing is certain, prepaid meters in black working class areas, for both water and electricity, are fast proving to have destructive consequences.

SA CONSTITUTION AND RIGHT TO WATER

While the Constitution enshrines the right to water, there are a few serious drawbacks in it, which account for why today, ten years after it was adopted, millions of black people are still without water and sanitation and live with inferior and unhealthy standards of service. Water supply operates in a class and monetary-based system of differentiation. Households only get decent services and sufficient water if they can pay for it.



The Constitution does not quantify the amount of water citizens have a right to. As a result this made it possible for the municipality to take a non-consultative decision resulting in the supply of a minimal amount of 6kl per household. In fact the municipality has used the 6kl lifeline as a justification for high tariffs, cut-offs and deprivation thereafter for those unable to pay.

The Constitution also does not specify how water will be delivered. This resulted in the argument that prepaid meters are not prohibited as a mechanism of supply and so is permissible. The

legal case will test whether such interpretations are legally correct or permissible. But probably the biggest weakness of the Constitution is that it makes the delivery of all basic services and housing subject to the availability of financial resources. This simply means that the state could in a neoliberal budgetary context always argue that what it delivers or fails to deliver is due to such constraints.

A big danger for this legal course of action is that it could become a substitute rather than compliment mass struggles, as often happens. The many feasible

alternatives to prepaid meters were never seriously discussed with communities. Other than a yard standpipe, which would have created many problems for families, the municipality gave residents in Soweto no alternatives to prepaid water supply.

The fundamental problem of prepaid meters, the 6 kilolitres lifeline and the deprivation they pose strikes at the heart of the disparity between a rights-based discourse and the harmful consequences that water commodification has for poor communities.

RESULTS OF PREPAID WATER METERS

My research in Phiri shows several alarming measures poor households are forced to resort to when they don't have money to buy water after using up the 6 kilolitres lifeline, which is often the case after a week or two. The following are some measures taken:

- Toilets are not flushed each time they are used, in order to 'save' water and make the 6 kilolitres last longer.
- Hands are often not washed after using the toilet.
- Both the number of times a month clothing is washed and the amount of water used for this purpose have been reduced.
- The number of times a week people take a bath and the amount of water used when they do has been reduced.
- Often two people, including children, use the same bath water.

- Children are strictly prevented from playing freely with water, as they used to.
- Many vegetable gardens have been discontinued.
- Cars are seldom washed.
- People drink less water.
- Households are cleaned less often and less water is used when they are.
- Buckets are used to collect rain water which is used for cleaning purposes.
- There is evidence that the many problems these meters have created has led to much stress among household members. Arguments about water usage and even some violence has broken out.

These meters have profoundly affected social and political relations within affected communities. There is no doubt that the effects of these meters will deepen poverty and inequalities and increase risks to health. If the UK government took a decision to ban meters in 1999 because of the health effects they had in poorer communities, the case for their banning here would be much stronger because poverty and inequalities are so much worse. Interestingly, in the UK the municipalities led the fight to have them banned, whereas here the municipality of Johannesburg virtually imposed them on Soweto, and before that on Orange Farm.

It is a brutal irony that black households consumed much more water under apartheid than today. In Soweto an unmetered and unlimited amount was consumed, during which time the vast

majority did not pay, because of the poverty apartheid inflicted and because it was used as a weapon of resistance. Despite chronic non-payment cut-offs hardly occurred, whereas after 1994 millions of black people suffered cut-offs. These were physical cut-offs by municipal employees. In the case of prepaid meters such cut-offs and having to bear the wrath of communities become unnecessary because failure to recharge expired meters results in automatic disconnections.

There are numerous other advantages these meters have for water companies and municipalities and many disadvantages and dangers for poor households, which space constraints do not permit exploring.

CONCLUSION

Trade unions and Cosatu in particular urgently need to pay far greater attention to basic services and the effects prepaid meters for both water and electricity are having on poor communities, in which their members also live. Their organisational experience can play an important role in supporting and advancing anti-commodification struggles, which are pivotal for pursuing their goal of a socialist society they profess adherence to. LB

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