



CWCC Statement on the Rioting

Statement by the Covid-19 Working Class Campaign

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The events of last week shook up South African society, especially when sections of the masses in the provinces of Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal entered the fray. The sheer scale of the events had the effect of compelling all classes – the ruling class, both capital and the ANC state, the middle classes and organisations of the working class – to nail their colours to the mast. Unsurprisingly, the ruling class and the middle classes, with a few exceptions, expressed their complete condemnation of these events as nothing but mindless lawlessness bordering on insurrection.

The Covid-19 Working Class Campaign (CWCC) notes that the dominant characterisation of the events coming from organisations within the working class resembles that of the ruling class. SAFTU, for instance, in its statement, was unequivocal in its condemnation of the riots as pure anarchy and destruction. Many others characterised the actions of the masses as blind criminality and anarchy.

For the CWCC, the inability to unpack the dynamics of the events and to make a distinction between the forces aligned to Jacob Zuma and the masses prevented these working class organisations from differentiating themselves from the ruling class. This inability also led them to take up similar calls as that of the ruling class, for instance, support for the deployment of the SANDF and the defence of capitalist property. This conflation of the working class entry and participation in the rioting with criminality, anarchy and 'backwardness', support for 'law and order' and the deployment of the army serves only one interest: to defend the capitalist system and all its myriads supporters within the dominated classes.

The inability on the part of many working class organisations to differentiate between the working class and Zuma forces resides in the lack of confidence in the working class as a historical agent of social change. For them the masses' actions are not methods of working class struggle. But if one looks closer, food riots have emerged as part of the arsenal of working class resistance. Argentina, for instance, was rocked by a violent wave of food riots between 24 May and 1 June 1989. Hundreds of shops were looted and in certain areas all the supermarkets were damaged. The masses not only took food and other primary necessities but also cash registers, computers and electronic equipment. The character and form of the food riots might differ from place to place but in the era of neoliberalism food riots has come back as forms of protest by the masses. It is no longer a relic of the pre-industrial period.

The entry of the masses completely changes the character of the events

For the CWCC what started out as an ANC factional fight driven by Jacob Zuma's social base within the lower black middle class within days became a mass, active intervention by a working class attempting to resolve its immediate problems of generalised hunger and starvation. Initially the looting was undertaken by the Zuma forces in Kwa-Zulu Natal with the attacking of the trucks on the N3 highway. It then moved to Gauteng, driven largely by the old-IFP elements concentrated in the hostels, who have evolved as part of the social base of Zuma.

With the entry of the masses, however, the rioting spread to areas not historically associated with the Zuma project – to areas in the East Rand, Midrand, Soweto and parts of the Vaal. The riots were massive in scope across the two most populous provinces and took on a mass working class character. With the entry of the masses the rioting took on completely different characteristics:

- The targets were quite consciously the shopping malls and there was no targeting of the local spaza shops, especially that of the immigrants, as a result the rioting was largely free from xenophobia, and where it did occur it were isolated occurrences.
- The destruction of the malls and shops were not the objective of the masses. It is in the process of the looting that the properties got damaged. This is completely different from the Zuma elements that set out as their objective the destruction of trucks, and the burning of warehouses and factories, particularly in Kwa-Zulu Natal.
- The looting took on a disciplined and solidaristic feature, where people took what they needed and no real squabbling occurred over the goods, taking on the form of a common purpose.
- The looting involved whole families – mothers, fathers, women and children.
- The mass participants had no fear of the police. They were not attempting to conceal their identities. They took the goods in front of the police, private security personnel and cameras. This is not the behaviour of criminals.

The political character of the social forces at the heart of the food riots

Another important feature of the mass rioting was the absence of any clear demands or slogans. No graffiti appear anywhere. There were no spokespersons articulating a coherent set of programmatic or ideological views. It is, however, the selection of targets and the form of action that are the best indicators of the masses' perception and their state of organisation.

- The rioting on the part of these sections of the masses was a clear response to the critical state of hunger and poverty caused by 25 years of neoliberalism and the government's response to Covid-19, which included a lockdown with no real social protection and support for the masses.
- There is a direct correlation between the hunger of the masses and the targets. These food riots were a clear rejection of the state of hunger and deprivation.
- The targets of the masses indicate that there was a confrontation between the right to food and life versus the right to private property and ownership. With their entry into the mass looting the masses are saying that their right to the means of subsistence is superior to capitalist private ownership.
- What should be remembered is that the masses, in particular the unemployed, are excluded from the capitalist market in two respects: as owners of the commodity labour power where they cannot find jobs and as consumers where because they have no money cannot access the means of consumption.

The absence of demands and slogans is also a consequence of the how the masses entered the fray. The ambivalence on the part of the state security apparatus as to how to deal with the Zuma forces at Nkandla presented an opportunity for the masses to test the resolve of the oppressive apparatus. The utterances of the Minister of Safety and Security, Bheki Cele, that the government does not want another Marikana in face of the defiance of the Zuma forces, sent a signal that the police would not violently suppress the rioting. The masses took the gap and therefore had no time to formulate demands and slogans.

The absence of 'politics' on the part of the masses also account for the form of action, its very short duration and lack of organisation. The form of action did not demand much organisation, only a decision of the people and an unresponsive coercive apparatus on the part of the state. However, the action also mirrors the weakness of organisation on the part of the masses. The imperative of the immediacy of hunger and the absence of 'politics' were also not an adequate base to advance the struggle when the state got its act together and deployed the army and other right-wing sections mobilised in defence of capitalist property. It is when the masses have strong organisation, clear programmatic perspectives, demands and slogans that it is able to confront the oppressive state apparatus and advance the struggle. Faced with the might of the SANDF and vigilante groups the absence of 'politics' became a debilitating factor and the food riots petered out in a very short space of time.

Left 'critics' forget that the masses normally enter struggle not on the basis of worked out programmatic perspectives. It is when they take to the streets and undertake forms of struggle that it is incumbent on the organisations of the working class to unpack their meanings and the tasks for advancement that they throw up. The current conjuncture of generalised weak organisation within the ranks of the working class and the immense pressures of deprivation will be characterised by these forms of actions. We are going to see many such waves of actions. Under these conditions of weak organisation and pressures of poverty, such forms of action become not only possible but also necessary. In this way the masses are shaking off their passive acquiescence and acceptance of their state of deprivation. This is the single most important feature of the events of the past two weeks.

As part of this process of building organisation and programmatic clarification the task of militants is not to condemn the masses but to unpack the significance and meanings of these actions, reinforce the programmatic implication that they reveal of which they may not have been self-conscious. It is through this process of clarification that the next round of uprisings will take on different characteristics.

This task of clarifying the meanings of these food riots for the rest of the working class is also important in that it could lay the basis for unifying politics. Presently within the working class there are mixed views, ranging from sympathy with the rioters to concerns over job losses, increased food prices and uncertainty about these forms of actions. These concerns of the rest of the working class are understandable in the context of the lack of a unifying politics within the working class. Overcoming these varying concerns of the masses is critical in developing a unified programme of struggle.

The ANC government unleashes instruments of repression on communities

In response to the entry of the masses into events and the ambivalence of the SAPS towards it, the ANC government resorted to the use and deployment of the SANDF. The deployment of the SANDF was a direct response to the massification of the riots and the intention is not only to suppress the current wave of unrest but also to deal with future struggles of the working class. Not only is the ruling class relying on the normal repressive apparatus but we note that a new kind of vigilantism arose that had the aim of violently suppressing the

masses and protecting capitalist property. Reactionary, racist elements in communities, the taxi associations and the Community Policing Forums emerged as the defenders of capitalist property. In many places they attacked and killed people. Already sections of the ruling class welcomed these vigilantes and are calling for more support for these forms of vigilantism under the guise of supporting the communities. These forces could potentially provide the ruling class with a para-military element that can be used against future working class resistance. As we have seen during these events, the ruling class has no qualms about relying on such para-military forces to protect its interests.

We have also seen that the state is resorting to the carrot and stick method to obtain the passive acquiescence of the masses – promising food parcels for affected areas, a possible review of the R350 grant but within existing budget limitations. However, emboldened by the general support for law and order, emanating not only from its own ranks but also from the ranks of the working class as well, the state is going to rely more on the stick to drive its neoliberal agenda. The ruling class has made it clear that the working class will have to pay the costs for the riots. Cyril Ramaphosa made it clear that the masses are going to suffer the consequences. In the light of this declaration and the fact that the ANC government is not going to abandon the neoliberal agenda, repression is going to be the preferred method of political rule covered with a veneer of caring. Working class organisations and activists are going to be subjected to more security surveillance, freedom of speech, organisation and protest is going to be restricted. In this way the ANC government hopes to consolidate and advance its neoliberal agenda, accelerating the privatisation of state enterprises and expanding the capitalist ownership of the economy.

In fact, the repression has started! Emboldened by the calls for law and order the ANC state in the form of SAPS is now brutalising the masses in its attempt to re-confiscate goods. The SAPS is breaking down doors, turning houses up-side-down, intimidating and harassing people. There is no respect for the constitutional and human rights of the people. This show of 'kragdadigheid' is meant to teach the masses a lesson not to dare to challenge the sacred right of capitalist property and ownership.

Equally problematic are the organisations entrusted to uphold and defend human rights that are unashamedly supporting this violation by providing a cover for these actions by claiming that these are not normal times. The state is using such justification to brutally re-assert its political rule and raid people's houses.

We have stated it many times that it is the ruling class that is to blame for the poverty and deprivation of the masses. Food riots are a social rejection of this state of affairs. Who is going to pay the costs thus is a matter of struggle!

Organising, organising and more organising is the key!

Based on our analysis of the forces and the meaning of the events, and in particular the actions of the masses, the following tasks and demands are important to shift the balance of power in favour of the masses:

1. Call on militants to intensify organising and building of working class organisations.
2. Call on militants to intensify the educational work on the significance of these events.
3. Call on organisations to reject vigilantism.
4. Call on organisations to condemn the brutalising of the masses.
5. Call on organisations to reject the confiscation of goods.

We demand:

1. SANDF return to the barracks
2. The right to assemble and organise
3. Immediate reinstatement of the R350 grant
4. The release of those who have been arrested for rioting

Endorsed by the Covid-19 Working Class Campaign (CWCC)-aligned organisations:

Simunye Workers Forum
Gauteng Community Health Care Forum
Khanya College
Casual Workers Advice Office
Orange Farm Human Rights Advice Centre

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