

## **In the eye of the storm**

### *The working class and the struggle against the corona virus*

The Coronavirus named COVID-19, which today (15 March), has infected at least 160 000 people worldwide and killed thousands has now landed in South Africa. We always knew that the Coronavirus was going to land in South Africa, and that it was going to pose a grave danger to the population, and to the working class in particular. The South African state did very little to take leadership during the spread of the virus globally, even though South African citizens were affected and trapped in China for almost three months now.

When the President delivered his State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 13 February, no mention was made of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impending danger for South Africa. Two weeks later, on 26 February, at the National Budget Speech, the only mention it deserved from Finance Minister Tito Mboweni was that the virus “is a source of uncertainty to this (growth) forecast [read: financial markets]”. At the time of SONA China had 1 300 deaths and 60 thousand infections. At the time of the budget speech China had 2 800 deaths and 80 thousand infections. By this time, well over 20 countries were in the grip of the epidemic. The light-mindedness with which the South African state and the ruling class it serves approached this impending catastrophe was reflected in the universal joy expressed by these financiers when Mboweni slashed health budgets as he delivered his mean budget directed against the working class and poor.

In times like this, when a nation and a country faces catastrophe, it is customary for the ruling elite to hide their greed, their predatory instincts and their absolute lack of compassion for the working class and the poor behind calls for “the nation to unite”. For the President, the coronavirus ‘will unite us and bring us closer’. For those of us who spend time working to organise the working class and poor against daily instances of injustice and impoverishment, we must not be fooled. Under the cover of this “unity” and “bringing us together” still lies the predatory instincts of a greedy ruling elite. If the working class does not mobilise and organise to combat the impending catastrophe, it will perish with the bitter memories of the Judas kiss administered by the country’s elite. The working class is for unity. Without unity the working class cannot win this battle. A unity however, must be based on shared interests. The South African ruling has proven time and time again that it has predatory interests that threaten the safety of the South African people.

#### *In the eye of the storm*

Khanya College organises Community Healthcare Workers (CHWs), among other sections of the working class and the poor. These CHWs – neglected, abused, exploited, disrespected and treated with absolute lack of compassion by the ruling class and its black elite, are in the eye of the storm. This weekend past, Khanya convened discussions among the leadership of the CHWs organised in the Gauteng Community Health Care Forum (the Forum), and convened a broader meeting of movements to discuss this impending catastrophe and how the working class should respond to it.

Like the CHWs, the working class that inhabits the informal settlement of this country, that rides overcrowded taxis everyday, that collects materials for recycling from the country’s

rubbish dumps, that has no running water in its matchbox houses, that has to look after orphaned children who will die of hunger if they “isolate” themselves – all these working class people are in the eye of storm.

Presidential messages that lull us to sleep will not prevent the storm or the havoc it will be wreck on the working class and its communities. Only organising and more determined organising, only the boundless energy by militants of the working class will save us from the impending catastrophe. To be able to rise to the historical challenge, we have to understand the task before us. We have to understand the conditions under which we have to struggle, we have to understand how more two and a half decades of betrayal have weakened the working class’s ability to resist the virus. In the meeting of over 60 activists we began by undertaking such an analysis, and proceeded to set out a programme of mobilisation and organising. We also set up a list of demands that we need to struggle for and ensure the state implements in order for the country to rise to the challenge.

First, we have to understand the conditions under which we will organise and mobilise, the conditions of our struggle against the coronavirus. No war has ever been won by sticking the heads of the generals in the sand. We have to face the impending catastrophe with a cold rationality and a courage to organise in the eye of storm.

### **1. The medical context of our organising**

COVID-19 arrives in South Africa against a background of a public health system that is in deep and structural crisis. The numerous instance of collapse are too many and too well known to list here. Only those in a state of denial need a list of these instances of collapse. Activists at the weekend workshop past, when discussing how China has responded to crisis, told of clinics here in South Africa that have been under construction for over seven years. It's the sources of this collapse of the public health system that need restating because these sources need to be addressed in the struggle against the virus.

#### *i. A split health system*

South Africa has two health systems – a health system for the rich, and a health system for the poor. A public health system for the poor, and a private health system for the rich. Sections of the working class currently employed on a permanent basis has been able to buy themselves out of the public health systems through private medical insurance (medical aids). Many of these members of the working class live precarious lives in this private system, with many of them running out of benefits on a regular basis, and thus facing either the option of delaying their treatment or falling back into a collapsing health care system.

The private health system has all the facilities needed to respond to COVID-19 – testing facilities for the virus, laboratories that can generate results within hours if not minutes, clean hospitals, access to water and (with their generators) a stable supply of electricity, instruments to rehydrate patients and resources to feed them. With these facilities, we can expect the elite to “isolate” themselves behind the walls of these private hospitals and clinics.

On the other side of the class divide stand the hospitals of the working class – water that sometimes does not run, is cut for lack of paying municipal bills, unstable electricity supply,

a demoralised and apathetic staff, (a staff that does not use these facilities when they get sick since they are contracted to state medical aid), hospitals and clinics with chaotic administration, laboratory services that periodically hit the headlines because of their lack of capacity and chaos. This is the health system that will have to respond to the COVID-19 coronavirus for the majority of South Africans.

The South African state has shown a shameful cowardice and lack of resolve in its state attempts of unifying the two systems. In his latest budget, Mr Mboweni made it clear that the National Health Insurance (NHI) – a very mild attempt at unification of the two systems on the terms of the rich and the capitalist class – will be postponed into the undefined “medium term”.

### *ii. A public health system starved of funds*

When the Minister of Finance did the bidding of the country’s financial markets on 26 February, he cut the budget of the health system. The health system is facing a systemic crisis due to years of underfunding and austerity economics, and the minister’s response was to cut its budget further. The much talked about NHI has a “pilot” of R25 million – a health budget smaller than some NGOs.

Like other parts of social services that support the working class and protect it from absolute starvation, health services have been hammered by neoliberal austerity for a quarter of a century. The dream of a health system that served the people was not only deferred, but it was positively scrapped by the ruling elite that assumed power in 1994.

### *iii. South Africa’s burden of disease*

South Africa has one of the world’s highest burdens of disease in the world. South Africa is the unfortunate leader in a range of disease areas, including: child mortality, malnutrition, Tuberculosis (TB), high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and the list goes on. In discussions on COVID-19 we now know the possibility of intersecting with such a high burden of disease is indeed a lethal cocktail. The experience of this coronavirus pandemic has shown high mortality rates among older people. For South Africans this is very little comfort. For a country with the bulk of its population made up of young people (in the over 60% range), the burden of disease among young people is shockingly high, and puts many young people at risk. Young people do not only bear the burden of the country’s high HIV/AIDS rate, but diabetes, obesity, and other diseases are widespread among them.

As we sail into this impending catastrophe, into this impending storm, we sail with a health system that is deeply flawed and in a deep crisis. We cannot respond to the crisis without radical changes in the health system. We will see if we are able to make lasting changes to such a deeply compromised health system. Our first and immediate task is to effect immediate radical changes to this system so that it does not compromise our ability to struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. [The meeting on the weekend discussed **simple, but radical** changes that will facilitate this struggle. We return to them below].

## **2. The social context of our struggle against the coronavirus**

The reason that South Africa carries such a high burden of disease is because South Africa is now the most unequal country in the world, and one of the poorest in the world. We need

to emphasise the poverty of South Africa's working class and poor people. The ruling elite is fond of portraying the South African working class as if they are spoiled children who don't know that "there are poor children in Africa." Many of these educated professors that serve this elite and work in its 'think tanks' do not even try to explain why the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in South Africa is estimated to be three times higher than in countries at similar levels of development, and is similar if not worse than burdens of disease in much poorer countries. They fail to understand that with no lines of retreat into an agrarian economy that urban people in poor countries sometimes enjoy, and with the complete monetisation of its means of daily livelihood, the South African working class has much higher levels of precariousness and systemic exposure to poverty than their apparently poorer counterparts in other countries.

The South African working class, apparently better clothed with cheap imports, have paid for these clothes with destroyed industries and have been thrown it into the street; this working class apparently better fed by GMO-ed food and fast-foods that raise its burden of disease – this working class continues to descend into poverty and knows what it means to go to bed without a meal.

The social context of this struggle is also one of deep, systemic and structural violence. In a report on the burden of disease published a few years ago, the authors note that "for a country not at war, South Africa faces an unprecedented burden of morbidity and mortality in relation to violence and injuries." We know that the ugly face of this violence is played out on the bodies of women and girls. In a highly charged social context where the fear of death is unleashed, the struggle for control of spaces and resources may well lead to escalation in the levels of social violence, especially against women and girls.

Women and girls, while in the frontline of this violence, are not the only ones. South Africa's ruling class has for a long time used the "foreigner" as a cover for its politics of austerity. Not long ago, a former Minister of Health used the fear of foreigners as a reason to explain why he and his government has shamefully capitulated to corporate interests and could not roll out an effective health system. Xenophobia may rear its ugly head as the failure of the state is transferred onto African foreign nationals.

A defining feature of our social context is the epidemic of unemployment that faces large sections of the working class and working class communities. We know that more than 50% of young people are unemployed, a much higher proportion than the already high rate of unemployed in the country. This high rate of unemployment is a social catastrophe by any measure. Within the context of the coronavirus and the struggle against it, it is beyond catastrophe.

The youth is the fundamental social force in the struggle against major national disasters. No major wars or national disasters have ever been won without the youth. South Africa's youth has been betrayed and is deeply compromised. Members of the ruling elite and its 'specialists' can never understand why the South African youth appear to have (or indeed have) a death wish. All the branding, the adverts, the Radio talk shows, the speeches and declaration somehow never succeed in stopping the continuing uptick in HIV infections in the country – the overwhelming majority of which are among the youth. The youth has

been demoralised by a quarter of a century of betrayal by those who ever-so-often claim to have fought for them. The youth are not fooled by all the sweet talk and the many kisses of Judas that are blown in their direction.

The poor social services that the working class have to live with everyday has the potential to become major drivers of the transmission of COVID-19 within the working class. Here we need to go beyond the fact that the compromised health of the working class make it vulnerable to the virus; we need to look at how the housing conditions of the working class (informal settlements), the transport it has to use to go to work (overcrowded taxis, trains and busses), the quality of the food it has to eat, the lack of running water in its houses, its meagre incomes and dependence on social grants, schools that have no running water. *A major organisational challenge for the working class is how it will organise itself so that it mitigates the potential drivers of transmission.* All the so-called radical or drastic measures announced by President Ramaphosa are all peripheral to this major organising and strategic challenge. He has shown himself to be a president that understands very little about the conditions of the working class. He has again confirmed his character as president of the rich.

### **3. The political context of our struggle against the coronavirus**

The failure of South Africa's health system, its division into a system for the rich on the one side, and for the poor on the other, is not a case of misunderstanding that can be corrected by a 'civil and respectable' exchange of opinion. Further, the high burden of disease, the social disintegration around us is a result of 25 years of the politics of neoliberalism; of austerity, of budget cuts and of mean policies directed against the working class. Many well-meaning progressive and even left-wing people, have adopted the mistaken attitude that the South African state has a "lack of political will". The South African state, and the party that administers that state, has a clear and strong will – *it is a will to protect and advance the interests of the ruling classes and its elites.* Whenever the party in power has to act in the interests of monopoly capital it shows a remarkable strength of will. We saw this will in August 2012 (the Marikana Massacre). We see this will currently in action with the privatisation of Eskom, SAA, the railways and a major attack on public sector workers. We see this will in the cuts administered to the health budget in the context of a collapse of the health system.

The struggle against the coronavirus cannot be won without breaking the stranglehold of the ruling monopoly capitalist class over the state and over society. We can access the laboratories owned by these private health institutions, we can get our people tested rapidly and comprehensively, we can mitigate the impact of chaotic transport systems, and we can mitigate the negative impact of ruling class and elite corruption on our ability to struggle against the virus. We may not be able to break this stranglehold in lasting ways, but it has to be broken at least for long enough for us to survive the storm.

In both their State of the Rich addresses on 13 and 26 February, the President and the Minister of Finance did not think COVID-19 deserved mention. They did not make any budgetary allocations for this life and death struggle – even though it was clear by then that a major crisis was in the making and that there was no way out of this crisis without a determined life and death struggle. As if this was not bad enough, after keeping the nation

waiting for more than two hours, no budgetary allocations were announced by the President in his recent evening address to the nation on Sunday, 15 March!

In an address that said a lot about ‘mechanisms’ and ‘command centres’, no special allocations were made to the health system that must deal with patients. With an eye to the financial markets, and with an even sharper eye to the budget deficits and to the Rating Agencies, “fiscal and other measures” were promised to deal with the “economy”. We will be treated to public money being used to float big capital under the guise of defending and protecting jobs. In the face of such a grave danger, and in the face of panic buying of essential items like face masks, sanitisers and so on, no rationing or price controls are announced. Not a single measure that deals with the impending impact of the coronavirus on the working class! The rich and elites will have their cake and eat it. They will have fiscal packages prepared for them, they will keep their hospitals, their doctors, their supplies and their lives. The more things will change, the more they will remain the same.

Such is the political context within which we will have to struggle against the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic.

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## **Strategic Perspectives: how to respond to the impending catastrophe**

Our struggle against the coronavirus has to begin with the understanding that this is not, primarily, a medical crisis: *it is primarily a social and political struggle*. At this point in the global pandemic, the medical establishment has no cure or vaccine to treat the virus. All they can do is to mitigate its effect through managing – and we should emphasise – *organising* – society in such a manner that it slows down, and finally reverses transmission of the virus within countries and within communities. We need to understand that even if and when a vaccine is developed and passes clinical trial, we will have to contend with global monopoly capital and its desire to make billions out of the pandemic. We know from experience that only a mass struggle and mass organising made possible access to cheap anti-retrovirals in South Africa. The South African state, always scared of its own shadows when confronted with the gaze of monopoly capital, had to hide behind the courts to force the predators to make cheap medication accessible.

We must learn from our immediate history of HIV/AIDS struggle that the ruling classes and the governments that represent them will run this way and that way when the crisis is in the public eye, and will quietly drop any commitment to this struggle when signs of containment appear.

### **4. Only organising can defeat the virus**

The working class goes into this battle with its organisations at their weakest for over 30 years. This weakness of working class organisations is all around us. Long gone are days when we could talk of street committees, of residential locals, of trade union activists, and of civic leaders that are not tainted by corruption and tenders. And yet the struggle against this virus can only be won by the working class rediscovering its organising traditions, and by

the working class throwing up new leaders that are not compromised by 25 years of corruption and dishonesty.

The struggle against the COVID-19 coronavirus faces five grave and immediate dangers:

*i. Social fracture and individual survival*

The first danger is that there would be a major breakdown of social solidarity as members of working class communities look after themselves and their families. A vicious struggle for meagre resources may ensue in which the law of the jungle prevails. In the early stages, this law of the jungle may operate through the established corruption and patronage networks dominated by members of the party in power. For the working class, **social solidarity** is the single most important weapon in the struggle against the virus.

Social solidarity is the ground on which resources can be shared; the ground that will make it possible for houses to be opened to neighbours in need of rooms to recover in; this is the ground on which children of sick parents can be looked after and fed by neighbours; this is the ground on which churches can become sanctuaries and turned into places for the sick who cannot be kept in homes without endangering the whole family.

*ii. Lack of infrastructure in townships*

The ruling class, the elite and its presidents have spoken a lot about “self-isolation”, about “social distance”, and “quarantine”. They have talked about how people must work from home. They have closed schools for extended period. They have said little about how the working class is supposed to achieve “self-isolation” in the one-roomed houses and informal settlements in which it lives; they have spoken less about how social distance will be achieved in taxis, a mode of transporting people which packs them as sardines; they have spoken less about where and how those who are very sick will be quarantined; they have spoken even less about how the precarious working class will ‘work from home’. The speech by President Ramaphosa represents one of the most cynical speeches by any leader in a time of war – for we are in a time of war.

Our strategy has to lean on the social solidarity of working class communities to create these infrastructures from within the townships.

*iii. The moral factor in war*

Wars are never won by guns alone. Indeed, in many instances we have seen armies with much more superior firepower suffer defeat by those with less hardware. In South Africa’s own history, the old (and still much alive) ruling class of apartheid understood that the war against the liberation movement could not be won without “winning hearts and minds”. Every general worth their salt understands the decisive role of the moral factor in war.

Our most immediate danger is that we are sailing to war with a demoralised youth. We are here not talking about a tiny tiny fraction of youth that is intoxicated with entrepreneurial ideology (a youth that is playing at being part of the ruling class). We are here talking about the millions of young people that are in under-resourced schools, in neglected colleges, the millions of unemployed youth – we are talking about this nation’s most vital resource. The

strategic challenge is how to re-energise this youth, how to transform its death wish into a zest for life – into a desire to serve and save this country from disaster.

*iv. Ruling class attempts to lull the nation to sleep*

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus epidemic and its transition into a pandemic, the South African ruling class has attempted to lull the nation to sleep. They have refused, and after the president's address to the rich (for he did not address the nation) they continue to refuse to take any measures that are needed to summon national energy and unleash a nationwide mobilisation. They have opted to appease a ruling class that is mortally afraid of a mobilised nation, of a mobilised working class.

All the measures announced by the president, his so-called 'drastic measures' are not drastic at all. All he has announced are measures already taken by the leading imperialist nations – after all, which Italian will be travelling to South Africa when the whole of Italy is on lockdown? The South African ruling class and its representatives understand that a mobilised working class may not leave its structures of class rule and profit making intact – even for a short period.

*v. A working class leadership that is out of touch*

Over the last few years the weakness of working class movements has expressed itself in various ways. One of them is that leaders of the working class – trade unionists, leaders of union federations and big unions and activists from communities' previous waves of struggle seems to have forgotten the meaning of organising. Whatsapp groups, Facebook posts and likes, radio talk shows, press conferences, columns in the bourgeois press, breakfasts and roundtables – all these and similar activities have substituted organising, or more specifically working class organising.

We must admit that these activities do represent forms of ruling class and middle class organising. These classes, with their control of the levers of power – including the state, the media and economic power – can afford to organise in such platforms. They use these platforms to test "public opinion" – and then they proceed to roll out plans and transform their ideas into actions.

The 'leaders' of the working class, on the other hand, depend on the bourgeois press to reach their constituency, although they are not in control of instruments that shape so-called public opinion. In many or all cases they find that they cannot transform their ideas into action. What is even worse is that these leaders do not learn anything from their failure, they go on repeating the same actions over and over again. The recent fiasco over the so-called Total Shutdown of Gauteng is a case in point. No shutdown of Gauteng happened, and the leaders simply dusted their jackets and moved on to a new "campaign".

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The meeting of activists on Saturday, 14 March at the House of Movements agreed on a campaign that is to unfold along a number of phases, as well as along a number of fronts:



## **5. Building organisation and raising consciousness**

A key, and fundamental pillar of the campaign is to build organisation at the most basic and local level.

### a. Localised organising

The general approach was that given the nature of the COVID-19 virus, localised organising in small groups, and meetings in small groups that can operate in lock-down conditions need to be the approach. These groups set the stage for the kind of neighbourhood actions that will be crucial in the struggle against the virus.

The meeting was mindful of the fact that even the existing groups cover areas that are too wide, and that organising will have to go further down and deeper into the working class. As other activists join the initiatives it will become possible to split into more localised groups.

### b. Raising community consciousness

The first phase of the campaign against the virus has to focus on raising the community's consciousness and preparing the ground for social solidarity. This phase begins with elementary interventions that distribute information in communities, and in this way put the activists into contact with their communities.

Mindful of the need for localised organising, the meeting divided the activists into five regions in Gauteng in which this work will begin. Flyers have already been produced and in the next days will be followed by posters to be put up and distributed at key spaces in townships where the working class congregates. These areas were identified and range from places like taxi ranks to spaces like churches and schools.

### c. Making contact with local organisations

Activists agreed that in the course of their awareness raising campaign they need to make contact with local organisations – youth groups, church groups, local associations of various kinds, local sports clubs, and other local organisations.

### d. Forming community neighbourhood structures

The second phase of this campaign is to begin organising local neighbourhood structures. In the discussions it was noted that given the nature of this virus, localised, small meetings in communities will be the key to organising as large crowds cannot gather without endangering the community.

The rapidity with which the campaign can transition from the consciousness raising phase to the neighbourhood structures phase will depend on how deep and widespread is the organising, and how deeply we reach into communities in the first phase. This phase will be shortened as more activists join the campaign. While the meeting noted the need to be careful with recruitment of local youth into the mobilisation (to ensure some criminalised elements do not take advantage of this mobilisation), it was agreed that through contact with local organisations the youth can be energised to act in defence of their communities. In turn, the mass entry of the youth into this struggle will signal the transition to the phase of building neighbourhood structures.

## 6. Creating health infrastructures for anti-coronavirus defence

A key challenge of the campaign is to create social and physical infrastructures that the working class can access in its struggle against the virus. These structures fall into two type: (a) structures that must be put in by the state on the one hand, and (b) structures that must be set up by the organised communities.

### a) Infrastructure to be set up by the state (local, provincial and national)

- Access to water and sanitation

One of the major defences against the virus is washing hands with soap on a regular basis. The meeting decided that an immediate demand is for the state to set up thousands if not millions of temporary handwashing facilities across South Africa's townships. This includes sufficient washing points at taxi ranks, train stations, shopping malls in townships and suburbs, clinics, schools, universities, informal settlements, libraries, community halls, spaza shops, churches, and other places where people gather in the course of their daily lives.

All places of employment must be compelled to install water/soap points or sanitisers. Workers and the trade unions need to monitor this and begin demanding these facilities.

The meeting agreed that these points need to be staffed so that they can function properly and so that they are not vandalised. [As the levels of organisation rise this vandalism will fall, as all revolutionary struggles have attested to.] The staff for these thousands of points is available in the millions of youth that are currently unemployed. We have seen this state retrench more than 5000 workers from the Extended Public Works Programme at a point when we need them most. This was another stab in the back on the South African working class. Against the billions that will be handed out to capital under the guise of "economic stimulus", paying these young people minimum wage (R3 500) and re-energising their thirst for life will be small change for the nation. The armed forces should be available to deliver water to areas where there are no immediate water reticulation points.

This demand, simple and radical in the context of the virus and its mode of propagation, will demand changes to the politics of austerity that have characterised the state's approach to water provision. Among other changes, the state will need to immediately suspend any actions on forced installation of water meters in working class households. The country cannot afford to have households with no water. The working class, through its organising initiatives, will create a heightened consciousness about the use of water in the context of the virus.

- Free testing for all at all health facilities

Activists in the meeting agreed that if testing is paid for, large sections of the community will not test and will thus be a danger to communities and to themselves. The current private paying testing (currently at R1 400), is unacceptable and is an insult to a country facing its most profound crisis post-apartheid. Testing must not only be free, but it must be available anywhere including and in particular at private hospitals and clinics. Testing must be free for all, including medical aid patients. All people must have is a form of identification and access must be guaranteed to nationals and non-nationals.

Workers who feel they need testing, who suspect that they may be infected, should not be expected to stay locked in their townships when they work in areas with state of the art clinics with testing facilities. Access to these clinics must be on exactly the same level as access by medical aid paying members. In addition, the state cannot be made to pay astronomical amounts currently being charged by private clinics. While the state will carry the cost of testing for members of the public, these prices must be controlled, and also made public so that other specialists with sympathies for the working class can see that there is no corruption in the way the state establishes these agreements with big capital. The mechanics of payments, and the division of costs between the state and medical aids is something that is easy to sort out.

The South African state is used to abandoning the working class. In addition to testing at existing private institutions and public hospitals, the state must roll out testing stations – strategically and following the patterns of the evolution of the virus – to ensure that in all areas of need there are testing facilities within walking distance.

- The state must command all laboratories

State laboratories are under-resourced and under constant pressure from the country's burden of disease. In contrast, private laboratories are doing good business for the chosen elite. We are in a state of war, and the state must take command of all laboratories. This does not mean the state must send bureaucrats to manage laboratories. What this means is that private laboratories have to service all test specimens whether from private or public hospitals and clinics. The situation where tests from township clinics only come back after days, sometimes weeks, is a scandal that cannot be tolerated in this context.

As with free testing, the payment must be shared between the state, medical aids and capital. In the interests of the nation capital cannot be looking for profits – only covering its costs of testing can be justified.

- Production and free distribution of appropriate masks

There is a need to produce appropriate masks and these must be supplied for free to communities. Every person who is in the country should be able to get a free mask.

It is clear that masks are in short supply and are out of reach of working class people. The state must set up mass production facilities for masks immediately. To achieve this it must temporarily expropriate companies that produce these masks, and put massive resources into production to ensure that 24-hour production lines operate. There are more than enough unemployed workers who can person 24-hour production lines in shifts, and at the minimum wage.

In the immediate short-term, the state needs to control the prices of masks and other essential items, and it also needs to impose a rationing system. Rationing of important supplies and price controls is important in preventing speculative buying and hoarding by the middle classes.

The state needs to ban any export of masks and other essential items except by the state itself in the course of its international solidarity obligations, especially to poor countries in our region.

- Production of essential medical equipment

The state cannot avoid its role in setting up and operating key infrastructures that will be needed to meet the challenge of this struggle. Essential medical equipment such as drips, protective clothing, and so on needs to be produced in large quantities. These supplies will be critical when temporary quarantine centres are set up in townships across the country. Temporary expropriation of such production facilities must be undertaken while it's early in the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As with masks, the state must ban any export of this equipment except by the state itself. All these instances of expropriation – on a temporary basis – are perfectly consistent with the South African constitution, which allows expropriation in the public interest. There will be no need for compensation as all the staff, materials, and utilities will be paid for by the state, and the salaries of the managers can even be considered as long as they are not exorbitant and predatory.

But the production of masks, medical equipment and other essential items cannot be left to capital and the state alone. We need to organise workers in the pharmaceutical companies, and workers in companies that will produce water dispensing equipment so that these workers put pressure from below. These workers must make the capital and the state accountable, they must prevent the corruption that is likely to result from the collusion between the state and capital.

Throughout this campaign when we make demands on the state our watchword must be – “from above and from below!”

*b) Infrastructure to be set up by communities and the state*

The country needs the government to get out of the state of frivolity and light-mindedness that it has imposed on itself as it tried to please the ruling class. All talk of ‘self-isolation’ and other irresponsible talk needs to end, and a serious process of preparing infrastructure that will be needed to deal with thousands of cases that need isolation needs to begin.

In the meeting on 14 March it was agreed that communities must identify facilities that can be converted into holding spaces for community members that need to be isolated or quarantined. These facilities include churches, community halls, schools, colleges, universities. Some of these facilities, like university residences, already have beds and a basic infrastructure – running water, canteens for cooking, electricity and so on.

The state needs to identify key ones that are already “owned” by the state, and communities need to identify these within their spaces. Neighbourhood structures will be able to find imaginative ways of creating these spaces, including “house-swapping” where a house is chosen by neighbours to house children, another to house the sick, and yet others to house neighbours who gave up their house for the sick.

Energetic and consistent organising will most certainly unleash solidaristic impulses that lie deep in the working class, and that we have seen all over the world in times of national crisis.

On its side, the state must be ready to provide the necessary medical infrastructure to these spaces that are converted into medical facilities – medical equipment, staff, heating, food and other support that is necessary.

## **7. Responding to the social needs of this struggle**

The struggle against the COVID-19 coronavirus will raise many social issues that the organised and organising working class will have to take up. Some of these issues are:

### *i. Securing employment of sick members of the working class*

Many members of the working class will not be able to “work from home” when they suspect that they may be infected. The state needs to protect these workers against dismissal. At no stage must employers be allowed to retrench or dismiss workers who are affected by the virus.

Companies need to be instructed to make extraordinary provisions in their finances and balance sheets to keep these workers on their books while they recover. We must not be fooled into believing teary stories from employers that they cannot carry these expenses. These companies are used to millions of rands of ‘write-offs’ and ‘impairments’. We all know of how CEOs gamble company funds in wild expeditions (like Woolworths in Australia) and the company is able to survive billions of rands in losses. The South African state, always afraid of its own shadow when confronted by capital, must not be allowed to get away with its cowardice and allow these retrenchments.

The state must not be allowed to use unemployment insurance funds – already meagre for the unemployed – to fund workers sick from the coronavirus. In addition, the period of taken off work for the virus in particular, must not be taken from sick leave of workers. This is an extraordinary sickness and demands extraordinary measures.

### *ii. Feeding schemes in townships*

As the president has already announced, schools will be closed for extended periods. We cannot tell how long schools will be closed. Many children within the working class are guaranteed a meal for the day when they go to school. For these children of the working class, closure of schools can be a sentence to extended starvation. To save these children from starvation calls for extraordinary measures while they are not at school.

The state needs to set up feeding points of young learners and pupils at key points in the townships, community halls, churches and other spaces.

### *iii. Make working class transport safer*

The working class travels in taxis and trains that are overcrowded. Here any talk of “social distancing” (another middle class fad like many others like it) shows how frivolous all such talk is. We need to be clear that here we are dealing with a government that in its budget of 26 February 2020 just suspended public transport projects in the building of “integrated

public transport networks in ... Buffalo City, Mbombela and Msunduzi municipalities". Together with these, funds to PRASA were cut, together bringing public transport cuts to R13.2 billion.

These mean acts notwithstanding small changes can be made to mitigate the situation. We need to engage taxi associations to ask them to ensure that a. taxis do not carry more than the designated amount of passengers; b. that they agree not to defend offenders; and c. that each taxi carries a liquid sanitiser and that passengers are asked to wash their hands when entering taxis and when leaving. These demands must also be put to the provincial and the local state, and we will demand that they enforce passenger loads and sanitiser facilities.

In addition to provision of water points at all train stations, the state must put more trains on the rails. This is not an impossible demand. We are not asking the South African state to build a hospital in 10 days. All it requires is a change in the policy that wants to privatise the railways, to upscale maintenance of the network – there are many retired and active engineers with the expertise – and trains. In times of national crisis and emergency, countries are known to produce not only train drivers and maintenance staff, but pilots and other highly skilled people by their thousands.

In order to build the capacity of communities to respond to the virus, the state needs to change course away from neoliberal austerity and towards meeting the needs of the people. The impending catastrophe cannot be overcome without a change of course. We know that governments like that of President Ramaphosa will not change course without mass organising and mobilisation.

We cannot wait for the body count to rise before we put pressure on the ANC and DA governments at all levels to change course.

#### *iv. Food parcels to support the working class*

The South African working class and its children is very food insecure and need to boost its immune systems in order to resist the virus. With school and universities closed, families will struggle to feed themselves, and this will not only expose them to the virus, but it may also generate panic and the collapse of social solidarity within townships.

We must demand that the state gives a food voucher of at least R2 000 per unemployed family. Further, families that subsist on grants must also be topped up. It is not impossible to manage this process quickly and efficiently. The Unemployment Insurance Funds is the ideal vehicle for distributing these vouchers, and the result of a nationwide survey will also ensure that the state knows its people, their conditions, and their needs. Indeed, set up against the massive programme of public works that is necessitated by this programme, the free vouchers for food will be off-set by people working and getting paid in the programme of public works.

### **8. In the eye of the storm – Community Healthcare Workers in the frontline**

Beginning at the end of the 1990s, and throughout the two decades between 2000 and today, CHWs have been placed at the frontline of the struggle against HIV/AIDS and a

steadily rising burden of disease. Many have died in the service of their communities. No guns or bombs went off – only the silence of killer diseases that have taken their lives. For their efforts these women have been violated and abused by the state. The state has thrown them as cannon-fodder into the many storms of South Africa's failing health system. Since 2012, these young women and men (a minority) have struggled for respect and recognition. They have waged militant but non-violent struggles over these years. They have struggled to build their own organisations, to amplify their own voice.

In 2018 they won an arbitration award declaring that they are employees of the Gauteng Department of Health on a permanent basis. They do not have the luxury of 'working at home', of 'self-isolation', and of 'social distancing'. The working class depends on them for its daily survival against disease. They have to walk into homes everyday, they take their own meagre wage to buy bread for patients so that patients can take medication, and they watch patients die in their arms. They leave these house with the infections they went to fight.

True to form, a government that is worried by the impact of the virus on profits, has violated its own laws, defied court judgements and lied over and over again about implementation of the award. One thing has been consistent from Qedani Mahhangu, to Ramakgopa, to Masuku and their senior ministers like Motsoaledi – they all respect financial markets more than they respect the lives of working class communities and those of CHWs.

CHWs, and the newly contracted EPWPs that will work in this fight against the corona virus must be trained, equipped and clothed appropriately to be able to work safely and effectively in this new battle. For a long time CHWs have been exposed to diseases that have led to their deaths. It is time that the government recognises that without the self-sacrificing workers this country would be a grave-yard.

At the meeting of its office bearers held in preparation for the meeting of movements, the leadership of the Gauteng Community Health Care Forum (the Forum) decided that the coronavirus changes the terrain of struggles. They decided that certain forms of direct action they were planning have become inappropriate in the light of the danger facing the working class. These young women, violated, abused and exploited will again sail into the eye of the storm.

When they formed the Forum in 2017 they adopted a slogan for their organisation: *Re tla dula re direla setjhaba!* (We will continue to serve the nation).

Once again they are called to sail into the storm. They *will* sail into the storm. All they ask is that their follow working class activists and communities provide some kind of air-cover.

From their own bitter experience, they know that only organisation can save them. They know that only organisation can save the working class from the impending catastrophe.

Khanya College and the Forum  
15 March 2020