

We Mekin Histri

by Pravasani Pillay and Richard Pithouse

"it's no mistri – we mekin histri" – Linton Kwesi Johnson

The streets of Durban widened and softened a little to make space for a new humanity. Under unusually dark and restless skies, the will to self-determination triumphed over the pull of authority. Barricades were torn down. Old ideologies and demagogues crashed and burned like forgotten satellites falling from the sky. New and forbidden ideas that were once whispered in the backstreets and on anonymous emails were shouted through loud-speakers and printed boldly on t-shirts and banners.

"Thabo Mbeki – You are a Liar!"

"ANC – Agent of Global Apartheid!"

"Mbeki, Don't Sell Our Future!"

"Mbeki, AIDS is as real as cANCer!"

"Mbeki, Give Us Our Land Now!"

The United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) came to Durban to do its business in the new democratic South Africa. That sounds like a magnificent moment: the people of the world gathering to denounce racism in a country where ordinary people have recently triumphed over organized racism. Mr Motsepe, from Pimville, Soweto, thought so too. Along with 250 others, mostly pensioners, many of whom were infirm and unwell, he went to the Johannesburg Central Station to catch a train to Durban. They wanted to tell the WCAR that in the new

South Africa they couldn't pay their electricity bills and that men with guns and sunglasses were invading their homes and disconnecting their electricity. Mr Motsepe and his friends waited well into the dangerous Jo'burg night before a train arrived. When they got to Durban, on Thursday 30 August, they were hungry and exhausted. They needed food, a place to sit, and decent toilets. So they walked to the NGO forum, held in tents erected on a sports field outside the main conference. They knew that they could never afford the \$100 that it cost to get into the NGO Forum but they hoped to be able to sit down on the grass for a while and perhaps use the toilets. When they arrived, the delegates panicked and the organizers of the NGO Forum called the army and the police. Perhaps you might like to read that sentence again: when they arrived, the delegates panicked and the organizers of the NGO Forum called the army and the police. Mr Motsepe and his friends were scattered into the city's hard streets. There they stumbled across a Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) march against the ANC's plans to privatize the provision of electricity and telephone services. The COSATU marchers welcomed them into their river of humanity. Later, ordinary Durban people, people with no pretensions to being progressive and no time or money for NGO conferences, found food and shelter for the exhausted Jo'burg contingent. They spent the night in a hall, under a sparkling dome of stories.

Walking through the same streets that raised fighters like Steve Biko and Ashwin Desai can give your walk

“Apartheid based on race has been replaced with apartheid based on class.” - Trevor Ngwane, former ANC councillor, now Anti-Privatization Forum activist

something of an arrogant swagger. You may find that you lift your eyes up off the ground and say to your master: “Who are you? Why are you here?” You may begin to believe that you own the streets – to greet your friends warmly and to spit at your enemies. You may feel that oppression makes for righteous impoliteness. Sometimes Durban sweats revolution. Everybody knows that something has to give. Something will give. And why not here? Why not now?

The next morning more than 20,000 people gathered to join the Durban Social Forum’s (DSF) march on the WCAR. The DSF had been set up specifically to facilitate networking for the march. In South Africa, protest actions have historically been tightly controlled by small groups of people in single or formally aligned organizations. The multitude has been organized into clear channels.

But following the model developed in actions against the Durban offices of pharmaceutical company Merck and the World Economic Forum’s Durban meeting earlier in the year it was decided that DSF would be a loose networking point for a variety of autonomous rebel organizations and individuals. Only the ANC were excluded. All the plans were laid with personal time and personal money.

The organizations that affiliated to the DSF included the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the South African Landless Peoples’ Movement, the South African National Commission, Jubilee South Africa, the Taflesig Anti-Eviction Committee, the Palestinian National Forum, AIDS Action, and a range of Durban community organizations from places like Chatsworth, Wentworth, Isipingo, and Mpumalanga. Organizations representing Palestinians, Dalits, Tibetans, Sri Lankan Tamils, Zambian, and Zimbabwean communities and others were given observer status at the planning of the march and invited to join the march.

Prior to the march, the DSF had drawn up a memorandum which stated that: “We march in solidarity with those who have struggled internationally against

factories are occupied and run under worker control.

>> **December 18** >> In Zomba, Malawi, the university is closed because of protests by students and other citizens against unemployment and the increasing cost of living, including soaring maize prices. Police, who use live ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas, kill one student while breaking up the demonstrations.

>> **December 19-21** >> Argentina’s largest and most

widespread protests in over ten years erupt across the country. The protests last for two days, despite (or in response to) the imposition of a state of emergency which bans all demonstrations. Over a million people banging pots and pans take to the streets of the capital, and hundreds of thousands more occupy the streets of other cities, leading to the Financial Minister’s resignation, followed by the resignation of the President, who escapes

his residence in a helicopter. Riot police attack, killing at least 35 people and wounding countless others.

>> **December 21** >> An international coalition of Women in Black in occupied Palestine remove one of the Israeli roadblocks which prevent Palestinian villagers going to work. They lie in front of Israeli tanks rolling down the streets of Ramallah in the West Bank, to draw attention to the 800 Palestinians killed by Israeli troops during the last

neoliberalism and global apartheid. At the same time we are marching against the South African government and its conservative economic policy, GEAR [Growth, Employment and Redistribution, the South African's Government's self-imposed structural adjustment programme which replaced the ANC's initial moderate social democratic programme in 1996] that is making the poor poorer. Under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki, our Government has not used the liberated state to confront global apartheid. On the contrary, the Government has acted as an agent of global apartheid." The memorandum went on to demand the scrapping of a massively corrupt arms deal, the institution of a social wage, the development of a principled foreign policy, an end to privatization, and the provision of affordable medicine to HIV-positive people.

Most of the marchers had funded their trip to the march themselves. Some had shrugged off threatening telephone calls from the National Intelligence Agency (South Africa's CIA). All had braved newspaper reports warning that the NIA had infiltrated the organizations planning the march and had 'information' that a group of 20 people were on their way from the Genoa protests to cause violence. Many marchers carried homemade banners and posters with slogans like "Mbeki is a Liar", "Stop the Assault on the Poor – Reverse GEAR" and "AIDS Treatment Now." Thousands of marchers wore headbands reading "Durban Social Forum Says Phansi GEAR".

The Dalits brought drums. The anarchists brought juggling, stilts, and unicycles. The landless farm workers

“August 2001... was a time of deep frustration and even despair [on the West Bank]... But then, at the very end of the month, something happened to provide a spark of hope. It was the Durban Social Forum at the World Conference Against Racism. I have never in my life seen so much hope and so much strength in the Palestinian people as I saw during those few days in Durban. The march captured everyone's imagination.”

– Andy Clarno, *From Durban to the West Bank*

brought ancient battle songs. Students brought photocopied pamphlets. Anti-Zionist Rabbis linked arms with Palestinians. The mood was festive, restless, militant, excited. There were no leaders. Just a fractious multitude who had forgotten their place, didn't care about the NIA cameras, and sought only to become something and to make something. Here and now.

Five hundred people who had travelled all night on the train from Cape Town arrived, to welcoming cheers, in time

to join the march in Leopold Street. No-one bothered to wonder if the brutal Belgian king was turning in his grave. It was their street and their day. The future was wide open.

Later, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, writing for the Black Radical Congress in the US, declared: "I have never been in a protest march like this one, though I had been to a lifetime of protests all over the world. Elders and the youth alike sprang into action, literally jumping and running many parts of the route, while screaming slogans. The march itself lasted almost three and a half hours, over a course of about five miles. Thousands of ordinary working class and poor people came out of their houses, churches, stores, and other places to join in, and thousands of others stood on the sidewalks to spur us on. It literally stopped all action in Durban, a city of 3.2 million people. I know I will never forget this march, and felt that I was part of a great historical happening." Most felt that this was the start of a new movement, a poor peoples' movement which would not be denied or ignored, and that the poor population would begin to speak with a loud voice. They were insistent that neither ANC government bureaucrats, heads of state, nor

anybody else would speak for them anymore. They would not be victims in a country they had fought to create in the battle to overturn apartheid, and they forcefully said that they would take control of their own destiny.

All those grinding years of no land, no water, no electricity, no country, no dignity, and no hope. All the lies from above. All the little compromises from below in lives lived under the long shadow of the Party, the Leader, and the Market. Suddenly something was in the air. People cast off their respect and ran, carelessly and joyously, into the future. The gospel was the gossip: the only loyalty is to humanity, here and now. Saying it out loud, even to the wind, can get you in trouble. Almost everybody was ready to get in trouble. It was a very, very beautiful thing to see. And hear. And feel. No one will forget how it tastes. How it sings in the nostrils.

When the marchers reach the police blockade at the International Convention Centre (ICC), where the conference is being held, the mood is militant. The Dalits drum harder and quicker. The police roll out more rusty razor wire. There are leaders now, standing on a pick-up

year and the occupation of Palestinian land. The tanks stop at the last minute, after firing shots in the air.

>> **December 21** >> The regional farmers' organization Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) of Haryana, India launches its campaign against the privatization of electricity and water in the region under World Bank auspices with a 20,000 strong rally. Police open fire and farmers respond with stones and traditional weapons, forcing the police into

retreat. The agitation continues for four months, and warrants for the arrest of 63 peasant leaders are issued under new terrorist legislation.

>> **December 25** >> Protesting against imminent privatization, 800 Colombian workers occupy the 17 story headquarters of Bogota's water, electricity, and telecom company EMCALI. The occupation is the culmination of ten months of community organizing, which included the

donation of utility usage to the poor on weekends.

Thousands of people provide constant support outside the building, including a community kitchen and concerts. Solidarity marches, strikes, and road blocks also take place. After a month of occupation, the union wins its demands to keep the company in public hands and maintain low utility prices for the poor.

>> **December 30** >> Argentina erupts again, this time

truck with a microphone. But people are cool with that because the leaders are the kind of people who are always outside and always brave, and the banners hanging on the truck shout “Mbeki is a liar” and “The ANC is an Agent of Global Apartheid”. The police are just standing there, but that makes the leaders acutely aware of their responsibility. It is, after all, just over a year since a student was gunned down by the police at a Durban university during a peaceful protest against the exclusion of poor students. The leaders call Thabo Mbeki and Kofi Anan to receive the memorandum. A low-level UN official is sent out. People shout and whistle their disgust. An old woman, unimpressed with the President’s reluctance to meet the people, says “Hei, that man is cheeky!” There is laughter and the mood mellows.

A nearby grass embankment became the peoples’ Geneva, the peoples’ ICC. Everybody is a Dalit. Muslims face Mecca for Friday *namaaz*. Everybody agrees that the Market is not God. A woman with shining eyes, long dreads, car tyre sandals, an “I am Red Judas” t-shirt, and dirty jeans walks past the police with a sign that reads, in red: “Mbeki’s Lies are the Real Disease.” A boy with a Palestinian *keffalah* around his shoulders and a Rage Against the Machine t-Shirt squeezes forward and nervously give her his worn copy of Pablo Neruda’s *Odes*. She takes it with grace and a warm smile. It’s that kind of moment.

Then the leaders tell the multitude that it’s time to move on to Hoy Park for a rally. There is a spontaneous chant of “ICC! ICC! ICC!” and a rush to the barricades. A DSF marshal

flings her arms out and hysterically shouts “Go back! Go back!” She is ignored but people take care to run around her. Up against the riot shields the chant gets louder. The visors on the police helmets come down. The *toy toy* dance starts. War dances work. The protesters feel stronger and stronger. A marshal in a “Landlessness is Racism” t-shirt is taken through the barricades and the police lines and up on to a truck where he is given a loud-hailer. He tells people to move on to Hoy Park for the speeches. They tell him: “Fuck off!” and a chant goes up: “Whose Side Are You On?” He tries some anti-apartheid slogans but is drowned out and gives up. DSF marshals link arms and form a barricade between the protesters and the police. Someone takes up Shona Malanga (The Sun Will Shine) and everyone points to the ICC when the chorus, with its lyric about ambushing the enemy with a bazooka, comes around. Suddenly the first barricade is down and then the second. The police move forward. A marshal, standing in front of the police, screams at the protesters to get back. A protester shouts back “*Voetsak!*” (fuck off). The marshal lunges forward in violent anger. He’s attacked and brought down before he can get near his target. The police watch. The spell is broken. The singing and dancing start again but it’s not the same. Big drops of cold rain start to fall. A critical mass moves on to Hoy Park for speeches and biryani. The people who have been up against the barricades disappear into the city.

That night one of the DSF leaders, Ashwin Desai, was on the television telling the nation that the social movements that marched on the ICC are a major new force in South

African politics. And that, for the first time, there is now a nationally organized and mass-based force that is directly opposed to the ANC, the President, and their Thatcherite economic policies.

History had been made. On the streets and on television.

Some of the marchers were disappointed that the march was steered away from the barricades and towards the Hoy Park rally. There may be some splintering to the left. But the organizations that made the DSF march such a success have more confidence than ever before and are already planning even larger actions in other parts of the country. Civil society has re-gathered and reasserted itself after being co-opted by the ANC in the years following the victory over legal apartheid.

The people are now the official opposition.

The next day the ANC have their march. Large full-colour posters have been up all over town for weeks and there's free transport into the city. They get around 7,000 people on the streets. Angela Davis chooses to walk with the ANC. Maybe you should read that sentence again: Angela Davis chooses to walk with the ANC. With a Minister who

refused to pay any rent for his mansion, while the poor, many of whom lost their jobs as a direct result of the ANC's Thatcherite economic policies, are brutally evicted from their homes because they can't make the rent.

What do we tell the children? We all make our choices. We are all, only, who we are right here and right now.

Pravasan Pillay and Richard Pithouse have a graft teaching philosophy in Durban. They scheme that if you're ever parking off in Durban and you're lus for serious chow you should waai to Johnny's, in Sparks Road, and tune the oe to score you a chip n'cheese roti. It's not as kiff as the prawn roti but it'll fill you up for two days, ja. And it gives the munchies a moerse klap, one-time, ja, full-on.

Resources:

- » Movement news and views with a Southern African focus at the Centre for Civil Society site: www.nu.ac.za/ccs
- » For up-to-the-minute news: southafrica.indymedia.org

against the newly formed Government coalition. The Parliament building is stormed by protesters and set on fire. One demonstrator says: "The Government has changed but the economic policy is just as bad", as another Government falls.



>> **January 4** >> India's banking sector completely grinds to a halt because of the decision by Standard Chartered

Bank to forcibly relocate about 30 administrative staff. About 70 per cent of all bank workers – more than 600,000 staff – refuse to work in response.

>> **January 9** >> A nationwide general strike shuts down Bangladesh as people protest against price hikes on fuel, gas, water, and electricity, which despite remaining at the minimum levels on the international commodities market, are being priced at maximum levels, according to

organizers The Awami League.

>> **January 15** >> Over 7,000 people in Santa Fe, Argentina take to the streets and attack banks with eggs, rocks and hammers, in protest against devaluation of the national currency, when everyone's savings accounts were reduced by two-thirds overnight. Police attack with tear gas and plastic bullets. Similar scenes occur throughout the Jujuy province, where government employees, who had