

**While 'economic apartheid'** is waging an all out war on the poor of new South Africa it has also galvanized some unique new movements. Reclaiming their dignity in the face of rising destitution, the poors, as they are called, use imaginative forms of direct action to oppose housing evictions and water and electricity cut-offs. Rejecting pure protest in favour of pragmatic locally-based action, neighbours in townships across the country are working together to find radical solutions to their immediate needs. Thousands have illegally reconnected their electricity and water, evicted residents have been put back into their houses, and evictions have consistently and often successfully been resisted.

Other forms of action have piled pressure on those involved in the neoliberal onslaught on their communities. The mayor of Johannesburg had his water disconnected, bank offices in Cape Town were occupied, and community groups laid siege to the debt collection building in Durban. As the movements grow, so does repression, with numerous arrests, police attacks, trumped up charges, and the murder of community activists. "[T]he black ruling elite," says academic Ebrahim Harvey, "has not hesitated to act against protesters with the jackboot that we are so familiar with under apartheid."

These community movements have challenged the boundaries of what was seen as politics in South Africa. Working outside of formal parties, unions, and NGOs, they have brought radical political action back home to the everyday lives of ordinary people. Without grand ideologies or illusions about state power, and by directly addressing their local situation, they challenge global capitalism and the distribution of power through building community and neighbourliness. They also are beginning to make contacts with other movements which echo their practices, such as the piqueteros of Argentina, the water warriors of Bolivia, and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. Here Ashwin Desai, writer and community activist, talks to Holly Wren Spaulding about the significance of the rise of this new form of liberation struggle for South Africa.

## Between The Broken And The Built: power to the neighbourhoods

an interview with Ashwin Desai by Holly Wren Spaulding

**Holly Wren Spaulding:** It seems we are all, as you have written, "between the broken and the built." What are the new tools of liberation?

**Ashwin Desai:** What are the new repertoires of struggle? Simply rebuilding, in many senses, community structures. But they are not to have the familiar leftist designs imprinted upon them. We need to struggle less for the Revolution and more for a humble and decent life. Of course this brings one up against the capitalist system. What some used to call, somewhat dismissively, "bread and butter struggles" have now mutated, assuming real constitutive force, and generating meaningful and sustained moments of counter power.

Many of these communities have 80 per cent unemployment: eight out of ten people don't work, and probably will never work. That's their life. While the poors do not have the sophisticated organizational structures of the unions, they have the need to fight to hang onto their shelters and there is no reluctance to engage in illegality and there is a great deal of innovation. This will to a dignified life involves very basic things: love, respect, consideration; freedom to move around your neighbourhood.

These are seemingly very minor events – manifesting over a communal cooking pot for example, but they are infused with a lot of politics, a lot of feeling. The new politics is driven by families participating as households, including the lumpen, the rabble, the single mother, the proto-gangster, the young children and the aunties – the unorganizable – and nobody is out of the loop.

There's a sense that these collectives should also be about rebuilding shattered lives, assuming some role in secular and religious celebrations, even pronouncing on who should be in the national cricket team. They settle some fairly serious community disputes and solicit charity and outside resources in a most sophisticated manner. They do seem woven into the everyday fabric of life in the townships to the extent that even after a lull in activity of three or four months, when a new crisis arises, their ranks are swelled.

Having said all this, however, because of the nature of the ANC's trajectory, which is a very brutal form of Reaganomics, community movements do find themselves, most often, confronting the state, which has become a fellow traveller with neoliberalism.

**HWS:** The history of liberation movements in South Africa leading up to 1994 is vivid, and somewhat familiar to international observers. What is the landscape of resistance in this new climate of supposed liberation?

**AD:** National liberation is infused with a lot of contradictory impulses, and sometimes it is so hard for people to grasp that. It's not about romance; it's not just about slaying the great monster. Inside that great struggle, the terrain is trespassed and criss-crossed with so much chauvinism and narrow nationalism that could easily turn into one-party fascism and xenophobia. At times there was a lack of democracy completely unjustified by any operational necessities: orders were given and orders were carried out, almost like a factory. Sometimes national liberation movements work in the very manner of company executives and underlings.

These days, part of building community movements is unlearning old ways of doing things. The fact that community movements engender more horizontal linkages and don't deify leaders is a very valuable part of the new repertoire of struggle.

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purchase for several billion zloty.

>> **November 13** >> Activists in Prague shut down a seminar on NATO and EU cooperation without even leaving the pub! Police arrive at the scheduled location of the seminar about half an hour before it is to start and tell the delegates that a huge anarchist action is planned against them. The terrified delegates panic, and send for their chartered buses to whisk them away to the EU

embassy on the other side of Prague, where the meeting commences under great tension. Activists are delighted to hear the news, as they never knew the meeting's location, and had no intention of protesting it.

>> **November 14** >> Thousands take the streets in Homebush, Sydney, Australia, to protest the WTO meeting and the US war, and to highlight the connections between military adventurism and corporate rule. A sound system

pumps beats from a rubbish bin on wheels, and the route of the march is determined by games of Spin the Bottle with a six-foot paper maché bottle, which is confiscated by police. "It's bad enough the police stopped us getting to the hotel, but when they stop us snogging each other, it's just un-Australian," says a member of the Bottle Bloc. The next day, a pirate radio broadcast by the Institute for Applied Piracy jams commercial radio signals for ten

**HWS:** You talk about casting off political labels and walking naked ...

**AD:** For me personally, and for many people, it's been one of the more harrowing things, but one of the most liberating things. In South Africa, the way you shook somebody's hand or clenched your fist, said which family you were in – whether you were PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) or ANC (African National Congress), or part of the Black Consciousness movement. Movements literally became your family. This is probably best epitomized by Govan Mbeki's response when asked what he thought when his son became president. He said, "I never had a son. All the cadres were my children, were my family." That's all people knew, that was their social and emotional circle.

Many of us have had to cast off old political affiliations, become strangers for a while, alone, and then rebuild something and redress ourselves in completely new clothing, and march against the very people we had previously marched alongside, and shared prison cells with.

Leaving political ideologies behind is a big deal; excising that part of your identity that depended on membership to a particular clique or creed was even bigger. In this new movement there is a need to break away from that, and from electoral politics. It's like marching against your parents: stoning them, forsaking them, and decrying them.

Many people's biographies are written with all kinds of contradictions, often displayed as schizophrenia. If Thabo Mbeki comes around, or Mandela, to remember the 16 June

## **“Women of Chatsworth unite Women lead the fight Pick up the stones Break Council's bones Fatima Meer is in the house...”**

– **Psyche, Chatsworth hip-hop artist**

Soweto Uprising, people still see the need to go to the meeting and chant the slogans of the party of liberation: the ANC, slayer of apartheid. But the next day they are fighting evictions, and denouncing the ANC as a party of neoliberalism. A militant opposition has happened in other places in the world, but in South Africa it has happened very quickly. The miracle here is how quickly the ANC has donned the cape of the IMF and World Bank, unsheathed the sword of structural adjustment. Because of this, the pace of opposition has had to move pretty quickly.

**HWS:** Who is involved in these movements?

**AD:** In the beginning, almost all over the country, community movements were infused with almost 80 per cent older women, simply because they were the first ones affected by the ravages of neoliberalism. Child maintenance grants were slashed, for example, and they were the first ones expelled from jobs as the enforcement of the reduction of tariffs sank in.

Women are the ones all over this city of Durban who are

working in sweatshops, working Monday to Sunday, earning \$65-75. Basic upkeep for a single woman with one child is about \$230, which is just really basic poverty. So they became part of the movement to boycott paying for services. They would be very docile in the workplace toward the boss – they wanted that \$65 – but they would be militant in the community by not paying for water and electric. They are topping up their salary, insinuating a social wage through their actions, saying, “This fucking state wants to allow people to pay us \$65, but they want us to pay \$105 in rent, so we are going to take that \$40 from the state by not paying.” At the level of lived experience translating into activism, women were, and are the real power.

**HWS:** Are youth involved as well, or are they creating their own movements at this time?

**AD:** When younger people come out, they bring their own style of taking action, and a different attitude – they want music, and to dance, and they get pissed off and do more militant things. They care very little about the CVs of former MKs [Umkhonto we Sizwe guerrilla army, now

disbanded] and those with long struggle histories. They care about what is happening right now and have a wonderfully cynical nose when it comes to the platitudes of politicians and other authority figures.

Of course young people are still fascinated by the local drug lord, the gangster, the rap artist and so on, and they find a sense of meaning through these things rather than through boring old struggle again. The youth still organize separately and youth movements have sprung up in some places, for example, the Vulumanzi, or water boys are a youth group that teaches others how to reconnect the water.

**HWS:** Are communities consciously organizing to be ‘non-racial communities’?

**AD:** In Wentworth and Merebank – Indian and Coloured communities here in Durban – people are organizing against some of the worst kinds of pollution. The city manager, Mike Sutcliffe, an ANC guy, says that African workers want the jobs there, and by fighting Shell and Engen, they will be denied work. The state apparatus can use race as a battering ram to divide people, and racial

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minutes to transmit across all stations a report on the WTO and its abuses against human and worker rights, public health, and the environment.

>> **November 15** >> After a two month long national strike by health care workers, the people of El Salvador win an historic victory. The legislature passes a law outlawing privatization of health care, and defining the state’s obligation to provide accessible quality health care to

every Salvadoran near their home, regardless of ability to pay. Strike leaders urge striking workers and supporters to throw their weight and experience into the struggle against privatization of electricity and against the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which would supersede the new law and mandate privatization of all services.

>> **November 16** >> An estimated 10,000 people marched in Auckland, Aotearoa / New Zealand today for a

GMO-free nation. The colorful, diverse crowd take their carnival to a park where they dance to live music and eat GMO-free food.

>> **November 20-21** >> Banging pots, pans, and drums while declaring their solidarity with the Argentinean people in their struggle to build a new society, activists from Eastern Europe gather in Prague, Czech Republic to protest against the NATO summit. While official delegates



Electrical worker illegally reconnects the power for the *poors*. Wentworth, South Africa

division in this country is 300 years in the making – it won't be unmade by some single individual or through natural processes.

We are building, but we have been sober about what we can achieve in the immediate. South Africa is understood as a black and white society. People are called “so-called Indian”, “so-called coloured”, “so-called Zulu”, as if we could wipe out 300 years of history by putting “so-called” in front of those words. As the rubric of Black has been rendered asunder, and there has been a flowering of all kinds of weird ethnicities and so on, yes, we have tried to build a sort of non-racialism as a culture.

Recently the Concerned Citizens' Forum, (a loose grouping of community movements in Durban), and the Landless People's Movement have engaged in joint marches in an attempt to bridge the urban and rural divide. Young and old, rural and urban, families, and migrant workers who have lost their lands after decades of labouring on the mines recently stormed the Durban City Hall. For a while at least, the shapeless mass was a multitude, chanting “Down with the ANC.”

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enjoy a posh banquet, hundreds of people give out free food under anti-war banners. Under the oppressive gaze of the heaviest surveillance ever seen in the country, with some organizers being detained as many as 15 times daily, 4,000 people take the streets under the close watch of 12,000 police, unknown numbers of soldiers, and US Air Force jets. The action leaves people exhilarated; many come from communities with very small resistance

movements, and most feel empowered after having built and strengthened networks of resistance across the region. >> **November 21** >> In Timisoara, Romania, a massive poster campaign takes place before dawn, resulting in the entire city proclaiming anti-NATO and anti-war slogans from its walls. Additionally, two banners are dropped over major highways, sending the police into a confused flurry, fearing that major demonstrations might follow. The

**HWS:** What are some of the tactics used to build a militant culture? On the ground, how does it look?

**AD:** We take traditional important events, the Bambata Rebellion of 1906 and Diwali, for example, and the neighbourhoods participate completely, because there are deliberate attempts to rethink that in this South Africa. Bambata is celebrated not as some minor Zulu chief, but as somebody who was a brazen and brave fighter against colonialism, and therefore even in Indian communities, gets embraced before Gandhi because he was carrying a stretcher for the British Imperial Army, while Bambata was attempting to chase the imperial army out. It's hard, but people are embracing those kinds of traditions as their own; histories infused with a fight against imperialism – not the accommodation of it.

**HWS:** What kind of tradition, if any, explains the willingness of say, Indian flat-dwellers in Chatsworth to stand in an act of passive resistance to defend a black man who is being evicted from his flat down the row?

**AD:** I think that's a crucial question. A lot of people on what

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propaganda campaign gets enormous media coverage, even more than did the announcement of NATO's invitation to Romania to join, and many interviewed on the streets are in agreement with the campaign.

>> **November 27** >> In Tbilisi, Georgia, activists protest outside the office of the Georgian International Oil Company, who has partnered with British Petroleum to construct the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. The pipeline would

they call the Left, decry and are very cynical about community movements because their militancy is not palpable – they're not storming the barricades, they're not building the Paris Commune; they do not know the exact difference between the IMF and World Bank and don't particularly care to know either. But I think what we are doing is building our neighbourhoods, which is as effectively anti-World Bank as any demonstration or resolution coming out of an NGO workshop.

In one case where this happened in Chatsworth, Mr Mhlongo was what they call a bush mechanic in the area. He looked after people's cars and they looked after him, through bartering. When Council security guards and the police turned up to evict his family, over 150 people, mainly women, drove them away. They blockaded the stairs that led to his flat. There were gunshots and tear gas, and at least six casualties, but the residents had vowed to prevent the evictions. It was not just a battle for Mhlongo, but for their collective dignity as human beings. That's the beauty of neighbourhoods: this idea of sharing with, and defending each other, and something beautiful and precious is being born.

Where does one struggle and how does one struggle? It would appear to me that marches in Seattle and Genoa get directed toward that more macro financial level and at systems. They take in Starbucks along the way as well, but it's almost like when you go shopping at the supermarket and you buy something you didn't have on your list, and that's great. But the struggle in South Africa wouldn't be smashing McDonald's. It's a more guttural, barricade kind

of struggle of just trying to defend what you have. But in doing that you are linking almost everything; by not allowing the state to 'cost-recover' and privatize and so on, you are forcing it to even greater forms of oppression, and thus the divide becomes more stark; to begin to say to the IMF and World Bank, "We can't abide by these policies, because in certain of our townships neoliberalism just is not possible." It's not like you're building something new in one community in isolation. People have a resonance of what happens elsewhere, but the targets for their anger are local.

**HWS:** Can you explain the significance of "living spaces that are not bound to the dollar sign"?

**AD:** The Housing Act in the constitution says that that rental housing must be provided through local municipalities and the state. While that's an Act, they're selling off or forcing upon the poorest people individual title deeds, and then you get Body Corporates emerging and so on. These Body Corporates, consisting of community members, are the ones who enforce payment of levies and evict those who cannot pay. It is a dividing of the poor and the poorest because the poorest can't pay, so they get put in other houses far out of town where they will be policed and won't be a problem. Some of them have lived in the same flat for 35 years (forcibly brought to these places by apartheid), are old, and this is their community and they are not going to leave.

Meanwhile, as the state is slimming down their provision of maintenance and social welfare for the poorest of the poor, you need more and more money in order to

survive as everything becomes privatized. This visits the most horrendous deprivation upon people; water and lights get cut off; parks get cordoned off with razor wire, and kids in one neighbourhood can't play in the park that was once a public space. The people who have access to the park are poor themselves, but they put up fences and they guard that zealously. By becoming owners, a process of separation from the community takes place, and the struggle becomes individualized as living spaces are privatized.

**HWS:** As social movements continue to grow, what are some of the most hopeful tactics and signs of change you have experienced as one who is active in community movements?

**AD:** A deep sense of what people in South Africa call *gatvol* – we're fucking fed up, would be the loose translation. The hopeful thing is actually a sense amongst people that this government will never deliver and that we're going to have to start building our own lives.

There was a sense that a developmental state would produce a largesse: houses would spring up when you got up in the morning, water taps would be installed, and so on.

It's disempowering because the government can't allow people to do it themselves by giving them the rudiments to build houses, tar roads, construct parks, because in loosening people's energies to take over their own lives, people get mobilized. These kinds of governments operate on a kind of "demobilization" you vote once every four years and you wait, and you wait and you wait, and the father figure – yesterday Mandela, today Mbeki – will deliver. Well, we are tired of father figures.

There's a sense that the state won't deliver, and people are making connections at the local level. Incredible bonds are being built between people as they imagine a new world. These are small things, but they're very big things.

What is happening right now is very jarring to old style Leftists – this almost imperceptible growth and flowering of social agents that don't have any manifesto containing their precise position on say, nationalization. There is even some hostility towards the very organic leadership that ensues in community movements. But the flowering I spoke of doesn't want leaders to represent its bloom.

The leadership in communities is people who may never

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run 1,090 miles from Azerbaijan, through Georgia and into Turkey, creating a two and a half mile wide militarized corridor, destabilizing the region, increasing human rights abuses, and degrading the environment.

**>> December 1 >>** About 1,500 people converge at Wat Don Chai in Song district, Thailand for the largest protest in 13 years against the proposed construction of the Kaeng Sua Ten dam. After erecting a 20 foot teak pole to invoke

the spirits in Hor Daeng village, they set afloat a banana leaf container, to carry away bad omens, and later burn a straw effigy of Somporn Chuenkam, the Phrae senator who supports the dam.

**>> December 6 >>** More than 200 *sans-papiers* (people without papers) and support groups occupy the International Employment Office (IOM) in Paris, France. Many foreigners working under IOM contracts receive no

social benefits, are not entitled to welfare funds, are required to pay 170 euros for an annual medical exam, and never get residency visas, no matter how long they work in the country. The occupiers demand that the IOM comply with France's social legislation, and that all *sans-papiers* be legalized, receiving permanent work permit and equal access to social benefits. The occupation ends when it becomes clear that the police are about to intervene and



have had any education, formally, but are powerful figures because they are so rooted. It's not a haughty leadership, and people have very few illusions about the inherent value of the leader as individual. Those who may be called leaders have a particular sense of themselves, which has something to do with the progressive erosion and confrontation of internal violence.

Fanon has a wonderful line about this, something like "A native who has a knife will turn on another native who has a knife rather than on the European." That happens. But you will find that in communities with social movements there are much lower figures of rape and child abuse, for example.

This rootedness, flatness, and suspicion of leadership is only one half of the equation. I have seen the beauty, and much of this, of course, is anathema to those who desire to use their anger to build up the political machine. You know, the working class party and so on. It has been nine years and people don't care about the ballot box. They might even vote but they know it is all a joke. A guy comes, a local Councillor, there are firecrackers and food, and then little flags and balloons for the kids; people probably give a vote, but they know that it is resignation at that level.

So if a house goes empty it's not the local Councillor who decides who goes in there, it's the community. They take someone off the street and give them a roof. We really are creating liberated zones in a way. People say, "Councillors earn a lot of money but they've got no work." Councillors are being rendered redundant because they don't worry

**"We don't ask why or when people are cut off, we just switch them back on. Everyone should have electricity."** – Virginia Setshedi, Soweto Electricity Crisis

**Committee, November 2001**

about utilities, jobs, and putting people in houses. People confront their own misery by taking over local fields and doing market gardening. It's not as widespread as water and electricity "theft," but it exists. Land invasions are happening in South Africa, not just in Zimbabwe. People here are taking the state's land – Mugabe is taking land for the state – and so we are learning from other struggles and their pitfalls, but that's why South Africa is such a vital part of this "we are everywhere" movement.

**HWS:** Finally, what are the struggles on the international scene that provide inspiration here in communities? Are they paying attention to what's happening outside South Africa, does that matter, is international solidarity important to people in communities?

**AD:** I think it's a complex kind of unfolding of things. The ANC government still likes to trade on its legitimacy; it's trying something new and what can it do, you know, they are victims. This posturing and rhetoric hides the inhumanity and greed of this new elite.

There are simple things that matter very much to us: the

international figures who criticize the ANC hurt them more than we do – we’re always moaning and groaning. When the Maude Barlows, John Sauls, and Naomi Kleins, and other individuals come and ask the critical questions, the ANC acts as if they expect something different. This needs to be understood in the context that those in power want to take advantage of the privileges that were accumulated by the whites when they were in power. When they are criticized, the rest of the world is forced to be cognizant.

We are still fighting a national liberation struggle: this is our government, they have betrayed us, and therefore we must crush them. Immediately people will say “But how can you think you have been betrayed? You should have known beforehand, this is the ANC, they were a bourgeois party, bla bla bla,” and the wise-aleck mantra comes out. Of course it is a betrayal because the teeming mass of humanity that got into the streets to be both part of the struggle, and to celebrate it, would have had expectations. Because of this, people are building, in much deeper ways, more deeply embedded structures than a flimsy NGO in a house.

The international event that probably has had the most

resonance is the Argentina situation. Some people from here have gone there and met the *piqueteros* and we were all surprised to hear of some of their direct action tactics. In our own discussions we were slowly drifting there as well, and discovering the physical and discursive efficacy of these types of actions.

The very nature of the Argentinean struggle appeals to us; it eschews trade union bureaucrats and NGO-types almost as much as it does Left parliamentarians. It is based not on a struggle captured and defined by tired Left dogma but seems centred on the experiences and desires of people who have a much greater say in the direction of the struggle than we are used to. Now we have the benefit of a rich and ready history.

I myself was completely taken by the fact that when the Municipal Services Project held a big conference, a lot of communities went up because they allowed a side show to happen. A lot of us were saying “Right, we’re gonna show videos of Chatsworth, Khayelitsha, Soweto,” and the Indymedia people were like, “Let’s show something international,” and there were videos from Seattle,

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another action is planned later this month.

>> **December 9** >> The government of Zambia makes a surprise announcement that the planned privatization of 51 per cent of the national bank would be halted, due to public and union pressure. In immediate retaliation, the IMF declares that Zambia will not receive debt relief, saying “If they don’t sell, they don’t get the money. Over one billion US dollars could be delayed.” Days later,

thousands march in Lusaka in support of the decision. The President of the Federation of Free Trade Unions speaks at the rally saying, “Now let somebody out there tell us, having privatized 80 per cent of our economy, why is it that we have become one of the poorest countries in Africa and in the whole world?”

>> **December 10** >> “The farmers are walking towards death”, says Alberto Gómez, executive director of

UNORCA, a national union of 30 regional peasant groups protesting today against agricultural provisions of NAFTA in Mexico City, Mexico. More than 2,000 peasant farmers gather outside the Congress building, denouncing new trade liberalization – part of NAFTA’s time-released formula – that is scheduled for implementation in January, eliminating tariffs on 21 farm products. If the implementation were to be

France, other American videos, and we thought people would be very bored. But that wasn't the case. This is *What Democracy Looks Like*, about Seattle, was the most seen and appreciated video.

To know that from the beast of the apocalypse people are revolting and inventive is very powerful. There was one video where someone was talking and activists abseiled [rapelled] onto the stage and so on. Of course it's an inspiration. We're very conservative actually, we respect persons in authority generally, and this encouraged people to be disrespectful of authority in new and unpredictable ways. There are increasing amounts of disrespect.

We've breached this idea of legal and illegal – to be illegal is something romantic. People now carry banners that say: "Stop squeezing the poor, you bastards," and there is no longer a sense that we must be dignified.

About two months ago in Mandela Park in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, the City Manager who has been evicting and cutting people's water went to address a mass meeting. He wanted to go to the toilet in the middle of it, but there is no water, so they brought him a bucket. Of course, try as he might, he couldn't pee in front of a thousand peering faces. But that would never have happened in the past, people would have actually stopped the meeting to allow the person to go to the loo. That has changed.

People are not showing solidarity with South Africa like during the anti-apartheid struggle. They are fighting where they are, and it makes a hell of a difference. They too are building under very difficult circumstances, and they are

being locked up, hurt, beaten. In many ways, at that level, it's a meeting of equals. This kind of solidarity is much different than the anti-Apartheid solidarity; the relationship isn't so much about funds – boycott South Africa products in Chicago, or whatever. People are saying "Boycott products made in America." People are taking their own situation and saying, "We're not going to live off of, and be parasitic on other people's struggles; we come with struggle and we go back to struggle."

Different figures arrive here, and are able to tell us their stories; ACT UP, [and other] AIDS activists who have taken on pharmaceutical companies. Greenpeace came and people immediately said "Don't touch this, these guys are this and that." We went down to meet the ship and they said they wanted us to organize certain things, and we said: "Well this is what we desire," and there was actually quite a gelling. I don't know much about this organization, but there was something very sobering about that experience because a lot of community members were at the meeting when Greenpeace said, "Look, we know you guys have to be in this town and already have criminal cases. We're prepared to go and be charged, so don't do it. Give us this cover, or organize placards, or whatever, but we are going to enter Shell. We don't expect you to come."

It was a hell of a thing for people because actually, it's often the opposite. People give us the money and say, "Go do your struggle now, and we'll just park off in the back." That kind of solidarity work was quite powerful. The media went gaga and put it on the front pages with these guys abseiling

in saying, “We’re prepared to be charged, but also charge Shell. We accept our fine.” When people are prepared to give of their lives like that, those connections can be quite sobering.

I think people’s stories are being told for the first time. Not Mandela’s story, but the real lives of ordinary South African people are being taken seriously, and the stories are about how they have received the transition, and what has happened to them now.

The poors of South Africa are ready to struggle one more time. They will make history. Again.

**Ashwin Desai** is a public intellectual, sometime newspaper columnist, teacher, and uncompromising community activist. He is the author of *Blacks in Whites*, University of Natal Publishers, 2002, *We Are the Poors*, Monthly Review Press, 2002, *South Africa: Still Revolting*, Madiba Publishers, 1999, and *Arise Ye Coolies*, Impact Africa Publishing, 1996.

**Holly Wren Spaulding** is a poet, teacher, Indymedia reporter, and community activist. She works toward the insurrection of water and stones from her home above a fertile swamp in northern Michigan.

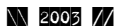
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**Resources:**

» **Totally comprehensive site with views and analysis of South African movements:** [www.nu.ac.za/ccs/](http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/)

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suspended, it would mean the revocation of Mexico's recognition of the treaty. This seems like a small price to pay – in only nine years of existence, NAFTA has resulted in the loss of over 24.7 million acres of cultivated land, pushing at least 15 million peasants off the land and into urban centres or into clandestinity in the US, according to a study by UNAM. Protests continue into the next year.



>> **January 1** >> Thirty-thousand Zapatistas from across Chiapas converge on San Cristóbal de las Casas, for the anniversary of the 1994 uprising. Each carries a machete, a bag of fire wood, and a festive but determined sense of dignity. The evening is marked by fire-lit speeches from the Zapatista commanders. They are punctuated by the clanking of machetes and impassioned chants of: “The

three powers of the Mexican government are racist”, “Long live the rebellion in Argentina”, and “PAN is the same as the PRI”. Then the cold of the mountain night dissipates as each adds their wood to the blazing bonfires. As flames leap 30 feet in the air, a sea of machetes held aloft in thousands of small hands reflects and magnifies the message and the warning of the Zapatistas.  
>> **To be continued everywhere ... >>**