

# Experiences of an Activist and ZACF Anarchist-Communist in Soweto, South Africa, 2002-2012

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I am an anarchist-communist, a community-based activist and journalist and a founder member of the platformist Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front (ZACF) in South Africa. I have been involved in many social movements and struggles, and today, I organise waste-pickers in Makhanda (Grahamstown), in the Eastern Cape Province. This is the story of how I became involved in the anarchist and syndicalist movement and of my first decade in the movement. It is a testimony on the history of African anarchism / syndicalism, and, especially, of its main current, platformism. It sheds a small light on our larger history in the southern African black working class since the 1990s.

I was born in the village of Chavani in 1973, to a xiTsonga-speaking, black working class family in Limpopo, South Africa's northernmost province. To the north, the province borders on Botswana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. To its south is Gauteng province, South Africa's (in fact, all of southern Africa's) economic hub. My parents usually lived in Soweto, a huge, famous black township in greater Johannesburg, Gauteng, where my father had come for work.

Townships or 'locations' started as racially segregated, impoverished, mainly working class residential areas. There were different townships for black Africans, Coloureds,<sup>1</sup> and Indians, at distance from white areas. Soweto, an acronym from South Western Townships, was the largest of the Johannesburg townships. Apartheid is gone, many in the black middle class and capitalist and political elites have moved into former white areas. But for tens of millions, the townships remain, and are key to the ongoing system of cheap black labour that is the heart of South African capitalism, used and abused by both old white and new black elites.

I often got into trouble in school in the village where I was living with my grandmother and uncle, and looking after the family's goats. I would run away: I could not go to my parents, as they were angry with me. So I would stay on the

street in places like the very cosmopolitan Yoeville area in Johannesburg, living on the tips I got as a car guard or working as a day-labourer in construction, or as a cleaner. In the village my cousin exposed me to the anti-apartheid movement and in Yoeville I became even more involved in politics. I was influenced by the anti-apartheid movement. I admired Nelson Mandela, leader of the main nationalist movement, the African National Congress (ANC), and Joe Slovo who led the main left party, the South African Communist Party (SACP). He lived in Yoeville in the early 1990s, and I would see him heading out in the mornings to buy the newspaper. I was not a member, and my sympathies lay more with the rival nationalist Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC), which presented itself as more radical.

It was in Yoeville where I began to meet people on the radical socialist left and my political consciousness and understanding of the class struggle took root. I came into contact with Claire Ceruti, a long-standing member of the Trotskyist socialist group Keep Left, which was then called the Socialist Workers Organisation (SWO). It was linked to the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain and the International Socialist Organisation of Zimbabwe (ISOZ), active in the struggle against the Mugabe dictator. Comrade Claire was the person who opened the world of far-left politics and I will always remember that.

I became involved in the SWO around 1994, soon after South Africa's first all-race elections. These were won by the ANC, which remains the ruling party. I met other young black and white activists who radicalised me; I started to organise at my school in the village and travelled to Johannesburg for meetings and political schools. Socialist ideas – ending capitalism, equality, freedom, uprooting poverty, racism and women's oppression, uniting the working class and poor masses – appealed hugely to me. They made sense to people like me, as they provided an alternative to the hegemonic view, a different way of understanding the world, and fighting for a real freedom.

I had gone back to school in the village in the mid-1990s, to try finish but it was hard, because I was older. I dropped out of high school before finishing the final year, called 'matric' in South Africa. When I completed it in 1999, I went to Cape Town in the Western Cape Province and worked for a time as a salesperson. I lost my job in 2001. I had no money, so I hitch-hiked back to Soweto. I can date this trip very easily: the news of the attacks on the World Trade Centre broke while I was on the road, so it was September 11. My family had moved into a new place in Soweto, the Elias Motsoaledi squatter camp ('informal settlement', in the polite language of the ANC). Like many of the squatter camps that emerged from the 1980s onwards, it was named after an anti-apartheid stalwart and people's hero.<sup>2</sup>

I found my father seated outside his new three-roomed shack. Elias Motsoaledi

squatter camp was formed in the early 1990s. It is next to the gigantic government Chris Hani- Baragwanath Hospital, near Chris Hani Road and the Golden Highway, in Soweto. It started around 1993, through a land occupation. Most of the residents had previously lived in rented rooms and backyards in different parts of Soweto. The racist apartheid National Party (NP) government had just about stopped building township houses in the 1980s and there was a massive housing shortage. So people took land, and built their own homes. There were around 1,250 stands in Motsolaedi in 2002, but most would have two or more households. So stands would normally have more than one shack. Many thousands lived here, in crowded conditions, without indoor plumbing and sanitation (houses shared chemical toilets and taps in the street), and there was no electricity.

Many households at Motsoaledi were made up of people from villages in rural South Africa; in town to work but not to settle permanently: they wanted to retire back to the villages. My father was among these workers, that is why he was in Soweto. Soweto has people from across South Africa, and beyond, as there are growing numbers of immigrants, speaking many languages. IsiZulu is the majority language in Soweto, followed by isiXhosa, both from South Africa. Most people in Motsoaledi were isiXhosa speakers from the Eastern Cape Province.

Major ethnic conflicts amongst black Africans in South Africa are generally rare, nothing like what you see in countries like Kenya or Nigeria. But the apartheid state had actively promoted this. At one stage it even tried to reserve different areas for different ethnic groups within Soweto itself, with neighbourhoods like Chiawelo for Tsonga and Venda, Dlamini, Zola and White City for Zulus and Xhosas, and so on. In the countryside, the so-called homelands of the apartheid state were also based on ethnic categories. There was Ciskei and Transkei for Xhosas (these were merged into the post-apartheid Eastern Cape Province), KwaZulu for Zulus (merged into the post-apartheid KwaZulu-Natal Province) and Gazankulu for Tsonga-Shangaan (split between two new provinces, Limpopo and Mpumalanga). These were run by the apartheid state through its allies, the black African aristocracy of chiefs and kings.<sup>3</sup> Apartheid and colonialism had inflamed these divisions.

But unions, anti-apartheid struggles and shared suffering had helped forge unity – not just among black Africans, but also with the other races. And parties like ANC and SACP had done what they could to suppress such divides. Post-apartheid provinces and municipalities removed formal ethnic and race-based governance, creating unified cross-racial and cross-cultural structures with new municipalities and new provinces in a unitary state. Sadly, however, the homeland system remains in place, since the chieftaincy is still part of the state.

The point of this story is that in the early 1990s, as the transition from apartheid took place, a number of powerful homeland bosses revolted against the changes. They feared they would be abolished in a new, parliamentary-democratic state. They allied with the white far-right including neo-Nazis, and with dissidents in the army and police to try and disrupt the process. The Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the official party of the KwaZulu homeland, had branches across the country, among conservative people including workers, from the homeland. It championed the Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu. The party had in fact started attacks on the ANC and the allied Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in the mid-1980s in KwaZulu and in the white Natal province. In the early 1990s, the ANC/IFP clashes spread across Gauteng, including into Soweto, killing thousands. In KwaZulu and Natal, the IFP attacked anyone who opposed the homeland, including fellow-Zulus. In Gauteng, it mobilised on ethnic lines, targeting Xhosas who it said controlled the ANC.

One result was that in many townships, there were all-Zulu IFP, and more mixed ANC areas. Each area was a stronghold of one party, defended by local armed groups. Motsoaledi was ANC and very much a no-go area for any rivals. Members of the joint ANC-SACP guerrilla army, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), established themselves in the neighbourhood as its defence unit against IFP attacks. These men hailed from the rural Eastern Cape, and though they started a local self-defence unit for the community, they became a serious problem too. They were cold-blooded towards all political opponents and intolerant of any criticism of ANC. Their activities blurred into vigilantism and criminality. Even after the ANC took office in 1994 and the IFP faded, they ruled Motsoaledi with an iron fist. In some cases, people associated with this group killed innocent people, expropriated belongings, extorted money and raped women.

There were four main sections or zones in Motsoaledi. *Nhlalakahle* ('stay well/ in peace') was the section where we used to live. It was considered a more politicised area, critical of the ANC. *Zwelitsha* ('new world/ country') was nearby, while *Pesheya* ('abroad') was across the river that cut through the camp. *Ezembeni* ('place of the axe') was the area where most of the political and other violence took place.

More than one person told me that I had been very lucky to have arrived at the Motsoaledi squatter camp in 2001, since the MK group would not have tolerated anyone questioning the ANC government. And my views were radical! But I arrived in the aftermath of the worst deeds, and when their power was breaking down. One of the key figures had been killed, apparently assassinated. Others had been arrested, charged and jailed. But the experience of political violence remained and older residents of the camp retained painful, vivid memories of terror, of which

they shared with me. As a result, I was also able to imagine those days and could relate them to others, as I am doing right now.

After the dark years of apartheid and the violence of the early 1990s, there was a great mood of optimism in South Africa. Mandela, the first black African and democratically elected state President took office. The ANC formed a Government of National Unity including the IFP and NP, aimed at preventing a counter-revolutionary rebellion. The dark side was that the chiefs and kings remained, as the price of peace, and many apartheid thugs and killers were amnestied. But people felt they had, so to speak, crossed the river of Jordan into the land of Canaan: Mandela was a Moses-like figure, a saviour, coming from a tradition of great liberators, like Oliver Tambo and Albert Luthuli. The ANC's colours – black for the people, green for the land and gold for the minerals – represented freedom; its election slogans, like 'A Better Life for All', inspired many and its call for unity, above race or ethnicity, was powerful.

The occupation of empty land by squatters was often thought to be simply a step towards getting a house from the state. In its 1955 Freedom Charter, the ANC has stated that 'There shall be houses, security and comfort!' and 'The people shall share in the country's wealth!' Naming squatter camps after ANC and SACP icons symbolised loyalty to the ANC and hope for liberation from grinding poverty and misery. Even in Motsoaledi, where some MK people had ruled by fear, faith in the ANC was high everywhere. In those days, to burn an ANC T-shirt or card would be thought insane.

To be sure, the ending of apartheid had been a great victory, won from below, ending a racist, white-supremacist state declared a 'crime against humanity'. But the ANC proved unable to meet popular expectations or keep its promises. In Motsoaledi, people put their names on the waiting list for government houses. These were called 'RDP houses', named after the ANC's 1994 platform, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which talked of massive state projects similar to the 1930s New Deal in the United States. But the RDP died a quiet death and was replaced by plain neo-liberal approaches, like the 1996 Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. Ending inequality was replaced by creating a black bourgeoisie, through what was called Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), often involving privatisation deals.

When I arrived in Motsoaledi, people were waiting for the government to provide proper water, power and promised houses. Many were unemployed or had casual jobs. Waiting nearly a decade, people were getting fed-up. They were not alone. Things were changing everywhere. From the late 1990s, there were growing struggles against neo-liberal policies, both by COSATU, and in the townships,

where people faced serious shortages, systematic under-spending, overbilling, harsh new cost-recovery policies for electricity, water and other services, and evictions. By the early 2000s, there was a wave of protests in the bigger cities and townships, often directed at municipalities. This usually meant at ANC town councillors, since the ANC held almost all seats for the townships outside of the KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape Provinces.

To give one example, in Pimville, a Soweto neighbourhood a few minutes' walk from Motsoaledi, residents were up in arms at rising electricity prices and over-billing. Many households could not pay and the state electricity company, ESKOM, undertook massive disconnections. In 2000 residents responded by forming the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). Later that year the SECC joined the new Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). This brought together some unions, township groups, the Johannesburg SACP, activists from the struggle against massive outsourcing at Wits University and far-left groups, like Keep Left. Anarchists were very active in the struggle. In fact, this is how the key anarchist group in Gauteng, the Bikisha Media Collective, came into the APF. Anarchists/syndicalists like Lucien van der Walt from Bikisha were among the founder-members of APF.

I soon participated in SECC activities, which took place at the Soweto Careers Centre near Bara Mall, just across the road from Motsoaledi. Keep Left was among the key political groups involved in the struggles happening around Soweto and beyond. Generally the socialist groups involved in the APF were outside the ANC camp. Besides Keep Left, these included the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM, which later founded the Workers and Socialist Party, WASP), the Socialist Group, and the anarchist Bikisha Media Collective, which helped found the ZACF in 2003.

The APF was an attempt to revitalise the types of struggles which had toppled apartheid. It targeted neo-liberalism as the source of the peoples' main problems. This meant APF criticised GEAR, which COSATU did too, and the ANC, which COSATU avoided. The APF increasingly presented itself as outside the ANC, although the reality was that many people in areas including Motsoaledi and Pimville were still strongly loyal to the ANC. Only now, in the late 2010s, is the ANC's credibility being widely questioned. But this is what made the APF remarkable: it was a Gauteng-wide coalition that was not controlled by ANC or SACP, where the far-left had a huge role. Anarchists and Trotskyists played a key role in APF committees and structures, including the secretariat as well as within affiliates. For example, Keep Left and the Socialist Group were involved in the SECC. So, too, were some anarchists, like the late comrade Bobo Makhoba, a ZACF founder-member who later moved to the Socialist Group.<sup>4</sup>

Most people were loyal to the ANC, even though their miserable daily expe-

riences in fact pushed them into conflict with it. But enduring loyalty to and connections with the ANC also shaped the way that groups responded to neo-liberalism and its disappointments. To explain: two big COSATU unions helped found the APF. One, the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) was up in arms about municipal neo-liberal programmes like the ANC-led Johannesburg municipality's 'iGoli 2002'. This involved massive privatisation including subcontracting, and rising service charges and harsh cost-recovery in the townships. The second, the National, Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) organised at universities, among other places. Comrade Lucien was a member of the union. It had just come out of the bruising battle against massive outsourcing at Wits. As an umbrella body and by far the biggest working class formation (close to two million at the time), COSATU was shocked by GEAR and had run general strikes. It was worried when, for example, ESKOM hiked prices as its budget was slashed by maybe forty per cent.

But COSATU, ANC and SACP were in a formal Tripartite Alliance and even had overlapping leaderships. COSATU, and affiliates like NEHAWU and SAMWU, believed the best solution was to work with the SACP and factions in the ANC to shift the ANC from neo-liberalism and towards the social-democratic approach of GEAR. The common ground established with other parts of the APF quickly eroded. Protests against ANC councillors were seen by ANC as counter-revolutionary. The far-left were always deeply disliked by many Alliance leaders. COSATU was committed to helping ANC win elections and that included in municipalities. So, it was not long before Alliance figures criticised APF for misleading the workers' and poor people's struggles, for being belligerent towards the ANC, and for holding 'ultra-left' positions. COSATU was willing to do mass strikes, but it was also involved in pacts with the ANC and industrial relations councils within the ANC-led alliance. Many in APF wanted to mobilise directly, regardless of whether this caused conflict with ANC.

By 2002, COSATU and the SACP had effectively left the APF. Now the main specific political organisations in the APF were far-left. The APF's paid organiser and public face was from the Socialist Group and SECC, Trevor Ngwane, to give an example. I was part of the far-left, and my life was very interesting. In April 2002, I was among the SECC and APF members arrested for protesting outside the suburban home of Johannesburg mayor, the ANC's Amos Masondo. Comrade Claire was another. Masondo's municipality was, as I said earlier, imposing the neo-liberal iGoli 2002. The great irony was that in the 1980s, Masondo had been a trade unionist and a leading figure in the Soweto Civic Association, protesting very similar policies; in fact he spent four years in apartheid's prisons in the 1980s as a

result. Now he was on the other side of the fence and part of the ruling class; his security fired live ammunition at protestors, who threw some stones in response. Ninety were arrested, forty-nine were jailed pending trial.

At our court appearance, protestors burned ANC T-shirts and membership cards. It was shocking and made national news. The publicity helped the APF as it appealed to people who felt the ANC's promises were empty. The mainstream media portrayed us as violent and unreasonable; many ordinary people were more sympathetic. A lot of people managed to live with the contradiction of being loyal ANC members and participating in struggles from below.

Around this time I was moving into anarchism. I made contact with Bikisha Media Collective during the protests at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg 26 August–4 September. The APF targeted these types of events as places where it could bring together people from across its affiliates, show its strength and get publicity. By this time there were similar coalitions to the APF in other provinces and also, an effort to organise a national Landless People's Movement (LPM). These forces were very excited when they managed to mobilise over up to 10,000 people at the main demonstrations at the WSSD. This was much larger than COSATU's block, which marched separately with a different programme. This was not a real measure of strength, since COSATU could mobilise 100,000s countrywide in its general strikes, but still it was very exciting and inspiring.

I formed a small anarchist group in Motsoaledi, the Black Action Group. I had started to organise community mass meetings of hundreds of people in Motsoaledi, which the local ANC tried to disrupt. Although the armed MK group was gone, there was political intimidation by ANC hooligans.

I recall one occasion when I was still in Keep Left, and recently moved into the area after coming up from Cape Town. We called a meeting to try get people interested in forming a community-based organisation at the main meeting area. This was an area used for soccer, called *emagroundin* ('by the soccer fields') in the Phesheya section. ANC hooligans loitered nearby, glaring at us. Then they came over, and tore up our papers, saying '*asifuni abovukengceni*', meaning 'away with political groups that come from nowhere'. Only the ANC and allied movements would be allowed. In fact I went into hiding in Johannesburg for a time, it was so frightening.

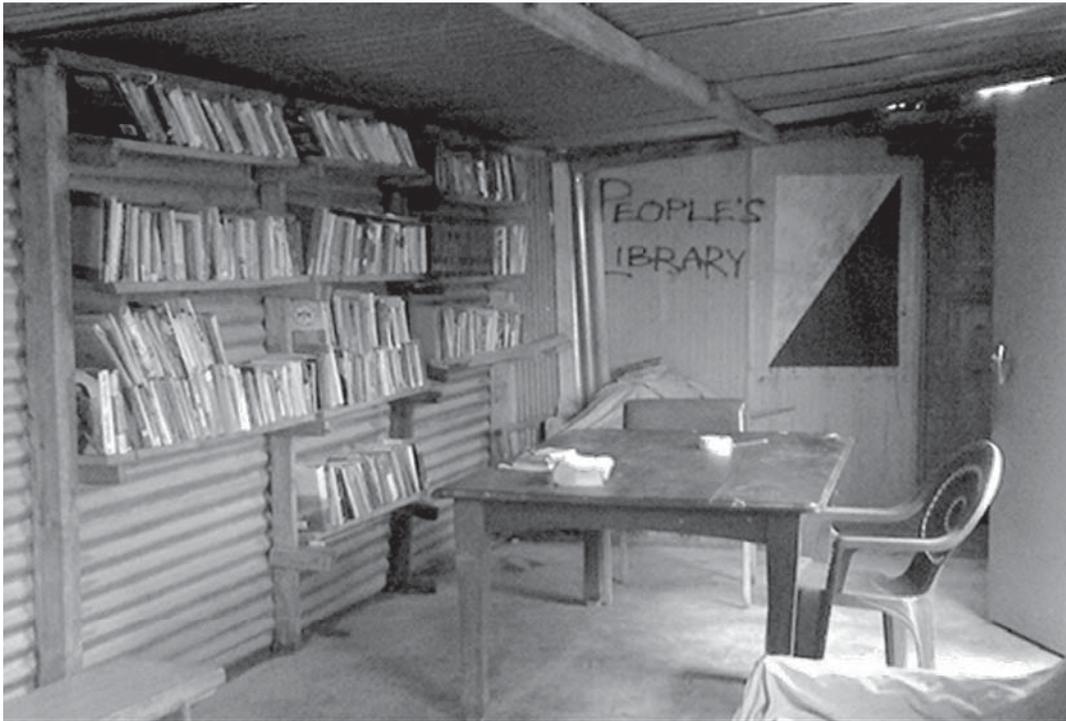
This pattern continued when I was an anarchist. They would hold their own meetings on the field, just before ours were to begin, or infiltrate our mass meetings and hijack them, or arrive on the scene, using a loudhailer to disrupt us. But the people's positive support strengthened my resolve and we anarchists started to organise projects, which I talk about below.

First, I must mention another important development at this time. On May Day 2003, the Black Action Group, the Bikisha Media Collective, an anarchist group formed by Bobo in the Dlamni neighbourhood and other anarchist formations, including from Durban, a big city in KwaZulu-Natal, came together to form a federation, the ZACF. This was an openly platformist group. This meant it identified with the class struggle politics of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin and the call for a tightly organised anarchist political organisation to work with and in mass movements, championed in the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* by Nestor Makhno, Peter Arshinov and others. Our view was that real freedom for the mass of people in South Africa would come from social revolution, which meant building a counter-power and revolutionary counter-hegemony from below.

We undertook a number of initiatives, working with the larger ZACF, grouped together as the Phambili Motsoaledi Community Project. We saw this as a step towards building self-organised counter-power that could fight the system and develop alternatives. We started a food garden and built a shack in Nhlalakahle as a meeting place. There was empty land, and a leaking pipe for water, so we could grow crops. Some of us would work on the farm, joined by others from ZACF including white comrades. Anarchist graffiti also went up.

Those involved in the Black Action Group, living in Motsoaledi, included Mandla Dlamini, Mandla Khoza (known as 'MK') and comrade 'Mustafa'. The first two were immigrants from Swaziland. They were also involved in building ZACF and anarchism in Swaziland, activities in which I joined them. MK was arrested in Swaziland for his activities against the royal dictatorship. I was arrested at the border post with a bag of anarchist publications on the Swazi side and only narrowly escaped a horrible fate with aid of ZACF comrades. Sadly, comrade MK passed away in July 2019 in Swaziland.<sup>5</sup>

We later managed to build a bigger shack, around two-meters by four-meters, mainly paid by ZACF. This allowed us to expand what we did, as we could now use the space for a library for radical materials, for meetings, and even for people in the community to use as a childcare facility. Besides meeting at this centre, anarchists also held meetings at the Workers' Library and Museum near the Market Theatre in inner city Newtown, Johannesburg. This was a resource centre with rooms to use for meetings, run workshops and it was used by COSATU people and also APF. It was run for some time by an elected committee, including Bikisha anarchists, and later came under the management of Khanya College, a Marxist NGO from the anti-apartheid days. Khanya also provided political education to activists, communities and workers. There was a Workers Bookshop with materials including anarchism and a large collection of books, and some were donated to the library at Motsoaledi.



**MASS MEETING**  
*Launching Motsoaledi Concerned Residents*

Agenda:-

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Election of Committees:
  - (a) Housing & Development
  - (b) Workers
  - (c) Media
  - (d) Youth
  - (e) Education
  - (f) Co-ordinating
  - (g) Legal
- 3) Matters arising
- 4) Way forward
- 5) Entertainment (by local artist), Banner making, Registration (library Motsoaledi Concerned Residents)

Venue: Motsoaledi Soccer Field  
Date: 15 January 2005  
Time: 12am till 6pm  
Contact: 072 125-0460

**Vuka Motsoaledi!!**

I also started a community newspaper called *Motsoaledi News* or *Vuka Motsoaledi*, which means ‘wake up Motsoaledi’, which was distributed for free. The print run was under a thousand. The larger ZACF supported the paper, providing editing and printing. I wrote most of the content. We used the paper to organise meetings and make announcements, but the focus was on linking lived experiences and daily life to the bigger political questions. For example, we articulated a critique of capitalism, and linked to the horrible conditions in which we lived as the black working class and we argued that real change needed much more than voting or choosing between bosses. In the October 2003 issue, we argued:

Motsoaledi is a community where the workers, unemployed and children live. This makes Motsoaledi our home. The community is the home of everyone. We all need a roof over our heads with a guaranteed future, electricity, water, schools and proper sanitation. For the ten years we have lived here none of these needs have been met ... Electricity lines run as close as 10 meters from our shacks but still we don’t have electricity ... no houses ... no security about our stay here ...

For us, the poor, the lesson we learned fighting apartheid is that only our own struggles can change our conditions ... We are all messiahs of our own lives. People of Motsoaledi, let’s unite to struggle for the life we need. We can send the message [sic] across for other communities to unite against the common enemy ...

Everyone knows without a blink of an eye or scratching of their heads that there is nobody who was born to suffer or can choose to suffer. We have worked hard for this world, everything before our eyes and the wealth controlled by the few comes from the sweat and blood of our forefathers, parents, brothers and sisters. That we have to suffer and wait only to die is daylight robbery of our human identity. The same people who exploited our lives are the same people today who are controlling the basic services such as water, electricity, waste removals and housing ...

Their only interest is to make profit, not to save lives. This means you cannot live if you don’t have money to pay. Where do you get money from after we’ve been robbed for so long through slavery, colonialism and apartheid? Today imperialism allows the multinational corporations to take over the control of basic services ... so that they can carry on sucking the last drop of our blood ... We must stay in solidarity to strengthen our struggle. We are many and powerful.

We called for a boycott of elections and direct action. In fact, I was arrested in September 2006, for organising under the slogan 'No Registration! No Vote!' next to the polling stations for the local government elections (see below).

Our paper was one of the only newsletters in the APF. The APF was struggling to produce its own newsletter regularly. This started as the *Anti-Privatisation Monitor* edited by Lucien, and was later revived as *Struggle Continues* under a new editor. I also circulated material from ZACF and its Zabalaza Books wing, including the ZACF newspaper, *Zabalaza*, for which I also wrote. Keep Left was publishing its own paper, as was DSM.

We need to remember that in the 1970s and 1980s there had been a huge alternative media, even if a lot of it was only produced in small runs and disrupted by apartheid oppression. There were hundreds of papers, newsletters and journals, even one national weekly, *New Nation*. Almost all of this had died away by the mid-1990s, except some union papers, which were mostly circulated to members, not the bigger working class public. Critical voices in the mainstream media that had relentlessly exposed the old regime were now were interested mostly in government corruption issues, not in exposing neo-liberalism and definitely not in mass mobilisation!

So building a revolutionary counter-culture against the system by publishing was challenging. While people were starting to fight back, they did not have much in the way of alternative media. Leafleting, loud hailing and going house-to-house were other important means of communication which worked very well. People used to come from every corner to witness what was going on and would get vegetables from us.

Because of the problems we had in using the soccer fields' area, due to ANC hooligans, we ZACF anarchists started to hold meetings at a place called *Esihlahleni* in Nhlalakahle: the 'place of the tree'. This was next to the food garden, and about two minutes from the anarchist shack in the same section. Slowly but steadily we built up support and numbers. By late 2004 we were strong enough to start using *emagroundin* ('by the soccer fields') in Phesheya. We had laid the basis for us to launch, in 2005, a mass-based community structure called the Motsoaledi Concerned Residents (MCR), which then affiliated to the APF. Like similar structures in APF, such as SECC, it accommodated everyone and was not affiliated to any political party. The launch was a mass meeting on 15 January 2005, at *emagroundin*.

On 16 June 2005, the MCR had its first protest demanding better services. The 16 June is a day filled with powerful symbolism, as it is the anniversary of the Soweto uprising of 1976. It was a very large event. I carried an ANC poster, with the image of state President Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela. It had a large

question mark on his face, sending the message that ‘we voted but you forgetting us: why?’ The success was partly because the MCR spoke to issues that affected ordinary people, such as the lack of housing and electricity in Motsoaledi, ten years after the transition. *Vuka Motsoaledi* and other material we produced or distributed helped raise consciousness and get people engaged in politics. Also, we had credibility from our hard work over years. We ZACF anarchists were central to the MCR leadership at this time.

Another march was held on the 26 July, following the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption in 1955 of the Freedom Charter in Kliptown, which is in Soweto. We handed a memorandum to then-Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiye. In the memorandum we demanded the houses promised to us. We also expressed that we did not recognise the anniversary celebrations, because they did not reflect the aims and objectives of the Freedom Charter. In this respect, the MCR was actively taking part in contesting ANC hegemony, including by showing the contrast between the ANC’s promises and the ANC’s actions

The MCR campaigned for people to illegally connect electricity from nearby factories, the hospital and the Apollo lights – huge lights on high poles, used by the police to monitor criminal activity – which the state set up in squatter camps (there were no ordinary streetlights in our camp). After the MCR mobilised the people, there were mass meetings. Here, the decision to illegally connect the electricity was widely supported. The daring and skills people showed were impressive. In less than a week, the campaign had begun. Unemployed young men would be up and down from early in the morning until very late at night, making connections and running wiring to shacks. Later, the state sent in groups of police to disconnect the power. The SECC, nearby, was doing something similar, reconnecting people cut off by ESKOM. Our comrade Bobo was one of what were called the ‘guerrilla electricians’.

Members of the ANC Youth League came to join the MCR in their numbers, and consequently had members in the MCR committee. This was very different from the situation earlier, when the ANC actively blocked us. As I said earlier, even some ANC loyalists participated in the struggles of the time, while COSATU, even though allied to ANC, was perfectly willing to call mass strikes. So, there was effectively a working relationship between us ZACF anarchists in the MCR, and supporters of the ruling party! We wanted the MCR free of parties, and they were happy with this, probably because it meant the MCR would not be supporting a rival to the ANC. We, as the MCR, were clear that it would not bow to any political party. That I was an anarchist-communist, it seems, was not a problem.

But the question of the ANC could not be avoided forever, as the APF had found when COSATU and SACP quit. Things came to a head in 2006, the year

of local government elections, when ANC was mobilising in the townships. The MCR decided not to participate in the elections. This position was adopted at the MCR mass meetings at Motsoaledi. It was publicised through pamphlets and further explained in *Vuka Motsoaledi* and ZACF materials. We also picketed near the Independent Election Commission (IEC) voting station in 2006, an event reported in the press.

The police cracked down. Two people were arrested in the middle of the night on the bogus charge of preventing people from voting. One was Lucky Ngubane from the MCR and the ANC Youth League, and I was the other, a platformist anarchist in the ZACF tradition. In the police van, we saw a former ANC town councillor, which clearly showed that the police were on the side of the ANC. This was an act to harass us. We were taken to the Diepkloof police station cells, but released without being charged the following day, following community protests.

Later ANC supporters changed tack, and decided to simply hijack the MCR. In 2008 and 2009 young people, complete strangers, started calling mass meetings using the MCR name. I was increasingly silenced, such as being blocked from speaking. A new committee was foisted on the MCR.

There was a lot of excitement around the ANC as well, as a new leader. Jacob Zuma had ousted Mbeki at a major ANC congress in 2007, with ANC Youth League, COSATU and SACP support. Support for Zuma was based on the idea that GEAR was all the fault of Mbeki, and the illusion that Zuma would bring back the RDP and defend the working class. He promised no such change in policy, actually: people blinded themselves. So those who had been critical of the ANC under Mbeki threw themselves behind the ANC under Zuma.

The victory of the Zuma faction also saw a lot of spoils being handed out.

The people involved in the operation to capture the MCR were swept up in the excitement, or just ambitious youths who wanted to get ahead in the ANC. Positioning themselves as 'community leaders' was a way of raising their profile in the ANC structures, and rising in its ranks was a route into well-paid government positions, with all that offered.

The 'Zunami' as Zuma's rapid rise was called, probably contributed to the decline of movements like the APF in this period, which closed shop in 2010, although many affiliates lived on. Zuma's ten years as state President saw him rule over corruption, usually through privatisation scams, rising mass unemployment, a split in the ANC and in COSATU and a sharp decline in the ANC's popularity. The tragedy was that movements like APF were not there to assist working class resistance.

At one of the last MCR marches I attended at this time, in April 2009, people marched on the local ANC councillor with their grievances. I was not allowed

to put a question mark on Zuma's poster. But during the march many people supported me. They recognised my presence and cheered because of my contribution. I was also interviewed for the television report on the event.<sup>6</sup> The media called the protest violent. In fact, the councillor had the police shoot at us without provocation, wounding some of our members. This fact was not reported, nor the fact that we had stayed in the shacks for almost twenty years without sanitation, electricity, proper housing and schools, with few jobs and low wages, and related health, psychological and social ills.

In 2010, I needed a change. I left for Cape Town, where I had a job for a while but I came back later in the year to try keep the Phambili Motsoaledi Community Project going. I managed to keep the garden going. MK and Manda Dlamini were back in Swaziland, where MK was arrested at one stage, and had to go into hiding on another occasion. Now, finally, the state moved in with the long-awaited building of RDP housing. I knew the farm would be gone, and the old community spaces with it.

I decided to enrol for a BA degree at the University of South Africa by correspondence, going back to the village and when I finished at the end of 2015, I did a graduate diploma in the African Programme on Museum and Heritage Studies (APMHS) at the University of the Western Cape, followed by studying at Rhodes University in Makhanda, where I remain active with the ZACF comrades.

I have been back to Motsoaledi a few times, although my family has moved away. Although RDP houses have been built, many people on the waiting list did not get housed, as the process was corrupt. The neighbourhood is now sadly cut through by a new divide between those with RDP houses and those still in shacks. There is no sign of the MCR, but people remember our efforts, and greet me everywhere. And like a flower through the cracks, some of our old graffiti can still be seen.

As anarchist-communists in the platformist ZACF tradition, we can say we have made a real contribution to the struggle for working class freedom, the genuine national liberation of the black and working masses, and the fight for a new world. But the work continues. It has been an interesting and tough road, but I march on.

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## NOTES

1. 'Coloured' in southern Africa refers to people of mixed, black African, Asian, Khoisan, European and / or slave descent, mostly working class and poor, generally Afrikaans-speaking.
2. Elias Mathope Motsoaledi (26 July 1924–9 May 1994) was a lifelong ANC and SACP member who came from what is now Limpopo Province (a municipality there is named after him). He was a factory worker, active in Communist-led unions and was one of eight men found guilty at the 1963-1964 Rivonia treason trial of armed struggle against the apartheid state. Fellow defendants included Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu and Harold Wolpe.
3. Thirteen per cent of South Africa's land area was reserved for black African occupation under Land Acts in 1913 and 1936. These areas, called 'native reserves' were ruled through the chiefs and kings and access to land requires fealty to these aristocrats. Aristocrats who did not agree with the central government were removed from office, which is what happened to Mandela's father. So it was a system of indirect rule and each reserve was for one ethnic group. It had its own ethnic customary laws and its own ethnically-based aristocracy. The laws were patriarchal in most cases. In the heyday of apartheid, the regime made the reserves 'homelands', the claim being they would become independent states. In reality, the homelands acted as reservoirs for migrant labour in factories, mines and farms, funded by Pretoria. The black African aristocrats who ran them were apartheid collaborators, brutally repressing unions, the ANC, SACP and other opposition parties and anti-apartheid protests. A modified version of the homeland system remains in post-apartheid South Africa.
4. '*Hamba kahle*, comrade Bobo Makhoba (1975–2016)', 3 October 2016, available at <https://www.anarkismo.net/article/29651>
5. "'The soldier has fallen": Mandla Khoza, ZACF anarchist-communist and Swaziland activist, 22 May 1974–26 July 2019,' 21 August 2019, available at <https://zabalaza.net/2019/08/21/the-soldier-has-fallen-mandla-khoza-zacf-anarchist-communist-and-swaziland-activist-22-may-1974-26-july-2019/>
6. 'April 2009: Protest in Soweto by Motsoaledi Concerned Residents (MCR)', available at <https://youtu.be/4OZ9N-uGMEM>. I am interviewed at around 0:58 seconds into the video.