

Chapter 15 ■ Part 4

COMMUNITY RESISTANCE TO ENERGY PRIVATIZATION IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

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In spite of South Africa's alleged "economic boom,"² the harsh socio-economic realities of daily life actually worsened for most when racial apartheid was replaced by class apartheid in 1994. That process occurred in the context of a general shift to global neoliberal power, instead of prior Keynesian eras in which middle-income countries like South Africa were permitted to build an industrial base and balance their economies through inward oriented strategies.

South Africa suffered enormously from neoliberal policies that increased income inequality (with the Gini coefficient soaring from below 0.6 in 1994 to 0.72 by 2006)³ and doubled the official unemployment rate (from 16 percent in 1994 to around 32 percent by the early 2000s), as ecological problems became far worse, according to the government's 2006 "Environmental Outlook" research report, which noted "a general decline in the state of the environment."⁴ Social unrest and the rise of social movements reflect the discontent: there were 5,813 protests in 2004–05, and subsequently, an average of 8,000 per annum.⁵ Until China overtook in early 2009, this was probably the highest per capita rate of social protest in the world during the late 2000s.

Matters will not improve, in part because of macroeconomic trends. The most severe problem is the vulnerability that South Africa faces in hostile global financial markets, given the 2008 current account deficit of 9 percent of GDP, one of the world's worst. It is also highly likely that investment and economic activity will be deterred by ongoing electricity shortages, given that it will take a generation for sufficient capacity to be added, and that the government confirmed its desire in early 2008 to continue offering a few large smelters and mines the cheapest electricity in the world, instead of redistributing to low-income people.

The electricity generation shortfalls of January–March 2008, which led to consistent surprise "load shedding"—entire metropolitan areas taken off the electricity grid—were due partly to a lack of new capacity built by national power generator

1 The authors—based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society (<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs>)—presented this paper to the Gyeongsang University Institute for Social Studies (supported by the Korea Research Foundation's grant KRF-2007-411-J04602). Thanks are also due to numerous collaborators in other institutions and justice movements.

2 Russell, A. (2007), "Post-apartheid phase two: Zuma's leadership of the ANC needs to prove skeptics wrong," *Financial Times* 19 December; MacNamara, W., A. Russell and W. Wallis (2007), "Post-apartheid phase two," *Financial Times*, 20 December.

3 Joffe, H. (2008), "Growth has helped richest and poorest," *Business Day*, 5 March.

4 <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2007/07062911151001.htm>

5 Nqakula, C. (2007), "Reply to Question 1834, National Assembly, 36/1/4/1/200700232," Cape Town, 22 November.

Eskom since the early 1990s (when excess capacity had risen to more than 30 per cent), the running down of coal supplies, and rain damage to incoming coal. But the main reason was the increased electricity consumption of metals smelters due to the 2002–08 speculative uptick in commodity prices. Indeed, even earlier, the economy's five-fold increase in CO₂ emissions since 1950, and 20 per cent increase during the 1990s, can largely be blamed upon supply of the world's cheapest electricity by Eskom to mining houses and metals smelters.

Emitting twenty times the carbon tonnage per unit of economic output per person than even the United States, the SA energy sector's reliance upon fossil fuels is scandalous. Not only are vast carbon-based profits fleeing to the mining houses' offshore financial headquarters but, despite consuming huge amounts of electricity, the smelters create very few jobs. Instead of cutting back on these sorts of projects, and turning the subsidies to renewables, the government decided to augment coal-fired generation with dangerous, outmoded Pebble Bed technology (rejected by German nuclear producers some years ago). Renewable sources like wind, solar, wave, tidal, and biomass are the suggested way forward for this century's energy system, but still get only a tiny pittance of government support.

Behind this gluttonous and reckless consumption of electricity in South Africa is a long history of cheap energy for big capital that was made possible by the availability of large amounts of poor quality coal and an incestuous relationship between the coal mines and Eskom, the government-owned electricity company. A history of state intervention in securing the energy needs of the mines, agriculture, and industry established the principle of keeping electricity as cheap as possible for the benefit of big capital.⁶ The ANC government has not changed this arrangement. But grassroots organizations have challenged these policies through policy advocacy, public conscientisation, international alliance-building, and the court system.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The ordinary Sowetan working-class electricity consumer is a good case study, because of extraordinary political mobilizations that have occurred in the Johannesburg "South Western Townships" (Soweto), including the student uprising of 1976. In the same spirit, using the same rhetoric and songs, a new movement against extreme electricity price increases arose in 2000, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee.

Sowetans experienced high price increases due to a huge reduction in central-local state subsidies. As a result, an estimated 10 million people were victims of electricity disconnections. According to the government, 60 per cent of the disconnections were not resolved within six weeks. This confirmed that the blame lay with genuine poverty, not the oft-alleged "culture of non-payment" as a hangover of anti-apartheid activism. Likewise, of 13 million given access to a fixed telephone line for the first time, 10 million were disconnected due to unaffordability. The bulk of

⁶ Fine, B. and Z.Rustomjee (1996), *The Political Economy of South Africa: From Minerals-Energy Complex to Industrialisation*, London, Christopher Hirst and Johannesburg, Wits Press.

suffering caused by the rescinding of vital state services was felt most by women, the elderly, and children.

Ultimately these problems are the outcome of neoliberal capitalism. The state's post-apartheid urban policies tended to amplify rather than counteract the underlying dynamics of accumulation and class division, despite electricity having been central in the anti-apartheid struggle. The first acts of sabotage by a then recently-banned ANC in the early 1960s were to bomb electricity pylons. The choice of target was symbolic given the economic importance of electricity and the fact that black working class areas were deliberately not electrified by the apartheid regime at the time. In the 1980s, when townships like Soweto were granted electricity, the residents launched a municipal services payment boycott that included electricity as part of their struggle against apartheid. This campaign was later adopted by the ANC, and its aim was to underline the illegitimacy of apartheid (local) government authorities and to make South Africa "ungovernable."

The slogan "electricity for all!" resonated with and moved the masses during apartheid days, in part because black households were denied electricity until the early 1980s as a matter of public policy (World Bank loans to Eskom during the 1950s–60s accepted this as a matter of course, though surplus value raised from black SA workers repaid those very loans). Hence one of the most popular African National Congress military tactics was the limpet mining of electricity pylons.

But the late apartheid regime and the capitalist class established their own agenda and kick-started the process of electricity commodification in a 1986 white paper on Energy Policy which called for the "highest measure of freedom for the operation of market forces," the involvement of the private sector; a shift to a market-oriented system with a minimum of state control and involvement; and deregulation of pricing, marketing, and production. After apartheid was replaced in 1994, similar language was found in the Urban Development Strategy (1995), the Municipal Infrastructure Investment Framework (1997 and 2001), and the Energy white paper (1998). The latter called for "cost-reflective" electricity tariffs so as to limit any potential subsidy from industry to consumers.

Asked why cross-subsidization of electricity prices to benefit the poor was not being considered, the state's leading infrastructure-services official explained, "If we increase the price of electricity to users like Alusaf [a major aluminum exporter owned by BHP Billiton], their products will become uncompetitive and that will affect our balance of payments."⁷ (Alusaf pays approximately one tenth the price that retail consumers do, without factoring in the ecological price of cheap power at the site of production and in the coal-gathering and burning process.)

Rising electricity prices across South African townships had a negative impact during the late 1990s, evident in declining use of electricity despite an increase in the number of connections.⁸ Most poor South Africans still rely for a large part of their

7 *Mail and Guardian*, 22 November 1996.

8 Statistics South Africa (2001), *South Africa in Transition: Selected Findings from the October Household Survey of 1999 and Changes that have Occurred between 1995 and 1999*, Pretoria, pp.78–90.

lighting, cooking, and heating energy needs upon paraffin (with its burn-related health risks), coal (with high levels of domestic household and township-wide air pollution), and wood (with dire consequences for deforestation). The use of dirty sources of energy has negative consequences, especially for women's health, leading to respiratory diseases and eye problems. Women are traditionally responsible for managing the home. They are more affected by the high cost of electricity, and spend greater time and resources searching for alternative energy. Ecologically-sensitive energy sources, such as solar, wind, and tidal, have barely begun to be explored, notwithstanding the enormous damage done by SA's addiction to fossil-fuel consumption.

The 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) mandated higher subsidies, but far stronger continuities from apartheid to post-apartheid emerged thanks to neoliberal pricing principles and the consequent policy of mass disconnections, preventing the widespread redistribution required to make Eskom's mass electrification feasible. As protests began in earnest from 1997, and the African National Congress witnessed rising apathy before the 2000 municipal elections, the ruling party introduced a "Free Basic Services" monthly package of 50 kWh of electricity per household, but it proved far too little.

Eskom continued to be a target of criticism, especially from environmentalists who complain that coal-burning plants lack sufficient sulfur-scrubbing equipment and that alternative renewable energy investments have been negligible. Moreover, labor opposition mounted. Having fired more than 40,000 of its 85,000 employees during the early 1990s, thanks to mechanization and overcapacity, the utility tried to outsource and corporatize several key operations, resulting in periodic national anti-privatization strikes by the trade union federation.

But it was in Soweto that the resistance became world famous and internationally networked. In 2001, domestic consumers paid an average price to Eskom of US 3¢ per kWh, while the manufacturing and mining sectors paid only half that amount. Two years earlier, in 1999, Soweto residents had experienced three increases—amounting to 47 percent—in a short period, as Eskom brought tariffs in line with other areas.⁹ This reflected the move towards "cost reflectivity" and away from regulated price increases, in order to reduce and eventually eliminate subsidies, so as to achieve "market-related returns sufficient to attract new investors into the industry," said Eskom.¹⁰

When prices became unaffordable and payment arrears began to mount, Eskom's first strategy was disconnection and repression. Eskom decided in 2001 to disconnect households whose arrears were more than \$800, with payment more than 120 days overdue. An anticipated 131,000 households in Soweto were to be cut off due to non-payment, according to Eskom—even though the company had only 126,000 recorded consumers in the township.¹¹ Johannesburg Metro authorities decided, in an act of solidarity, to cut off water, and began evictions, selling off residents'

9 *Star*, 15 July 1999.

10 Eskom (2001), *Annual Report 2001*, Megawatt Park, Johannesburg.

11 Eskom (2001), "Eskom Targets Defaulters," Press statement, Megawatt Park, 27 February.

houses in order to recoup the debts owed, in an attempt to pressure people to pay Eskom arrears.¹² A survey of Soweto residents found that 61 percent of households had experienced electricity disconnections, of whom 45 percent had been cut off for more than one month. A random, stratified national survey conducted by the Municipal Services Project and Human Sciences Research Council found that 10 million people across South Africa had experienced electricity cutoffs.¹³

The impact of disconnections can be fatal. One indication of the health implications of electricity denial and of supply cuts was the upsurge in TB rates, as respiratory illnesses are carried by particulates associated with smoke from wood, coal, and paraffin. Because of climate and congestion, respiratory diseases are particularly common in Soweto. In a 1998 survey, two in five Sowetans reportedly suffered from respiratory problems.¹⁴

Survey respondents reported many fires in the neighborhood, often caused by paraffin stoves, many of which were harmful to children. Eskom's disconnection procedures often resulted in electricity cables lying loose in the streets.¹⁵ Residents were unhappy not only about the high reconnection fees charged, but the fact that Eskom used outsourced companies that earn \$10 per household disconnection. No notification was given that supply would be cut off, and residents were not given time to rectify payments problems. Eskom can disconnect entire blocks at a time by removing circuit breakers, penalizing those who do pay their bills along with those who don't. All these grievances provided the raw material from which the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) and its Operation Khanyisa emerged.

SOCIAL RESISTANCE TO COMMODIFIED ELECTRICITY

The SECC was formed in June 2000, through a series of workshops on the energy crisis, followed by mass meetings in the township. Operation Khanyisa ("light up") allowed for mass reconnections by trained informal electricians. Within six months, over 3,000 households had been put back on the grid. The SECC turned what was a criminal deed from the point of view of Eskom into an act of defiance, and also went to city councilors' houses to cut off their electricity, to give them a taste of their own medicine, and to the mayor's office in Soweto. SECC were soon targeted for arrest, but 500 Sowetans marched to Moroka Police Station to present themselves for mass arrest; the police were overwhelmed. By October 2001 Eskom retreated, announcing a moratorium on cut-offs, and the SECC announced "a temporary victory over Eskom, but our other demands remain outstanding."

12 *Saturday Star*, 10 March 2001; *Star*, 17 May 2001.

13 McDonald, D. (2002), "The Bell Tolls for Thee: Cost Recovery, Cutoffs and the Affordability of Municipal Services in South Africa," Municipal Services Project Special Report, http://qsilver.queensu.ca/~mspadmin/pages/Project_Publications/Reports/bell.htm.

14 Morris, A.; B. Bozzoli; J. Cock; O. Crankshaw; L. Gilbert; L. Lehutso-Phooko; D. Posel; Z. Tshandu; and E. van Huysteen (1999), "Change and Continuity: A Survey of Soweto in the late 1990s" Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 34–35, 41.

15 In a shack settlement outside Cato Manor in Durban, this problem caused the death of eleven children in 2001 (*Mail & Guardian*, 16–22 March 2001).

- commitment to halting and reversing privatization and commercialization;
- the scrapping of arrears;
- the implementation of free electricity promised to us in municipal elections a year ago;
- ending the skewed rates that do not sufficiently subsidize low-income black people;
- additional special provisions for vulnerable groups—disabled people, pensioners, people who are HIV-positive; and
- expansion of electrification to all, especially impoverished people in urban slums and rural villages, the vast majority of whom do not have the power that we in Soweto celebrate (SECC 2001).

The *Washington Post* took up the story in a front-page article in November 2001:

SOWETO, South Africa—When she could no longer bear the darkness or the cold that settles into her arthritic knees or the thought of sacrificing another piece of furniture for firewood, Agnes Mohapi cursed the powers that had cut off her electricity. Then she summoned a neighborhood service to illegally reconnect it.

Soon, bootleg technicians from the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) arrived in pairs at the intersection of Maseka and Moema streets. Asking for nothing in return, they used pliers, a penknife and a snip here and a splice there to return light to the dusty, treeless corner.

“We shouldn’t have to resort to this,” Mohapi, 58, said as she stood cross-armed and remorseless in front of her home as the repairmen hot-wired her electricity. Nothing, she said, could compare to life under apartheid, the system of racial separation that herded blacks into poor townships such as Soweto. But for all its wretchedness, apartheid never did this: It did not lay her off from her job, jack up her utility bill, then disconnect her service when she inevitably could not pay.

“Privatization did that,” she said, her cadence quickening in disgust. “And all of this globalization garbage our new black government has forced upon us has done nothing but make things worse . . . But we will unite and we will fight this government with the same fury that we fought the whites in their day.”¹⁶

A few weeks later, ANC Public Enterprises Minister Jeff Radebe visited Soweto to offer a partial amnesty on arrears, which the SECC declined as inadequate. The focus then moved to fighting prepayment meters. From the SECC and similar campaigns emerged an umbrella group, the Anti-Privatization Forum.

How serious a threat was the SECC at this stage? The ruling party’s main intellectual journal, *Umrabulo*, carried a 2003 article by Tankiso Fafuli (later to become ANC councilor for Pimville), that gives a flavor of the challenge:

¹⁶ Jeter, J. (2001), “For South Africa’s poor, a new power struggle,” *Washington Post*, 6 November.

On the 24th September 2001 the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee [SECC] convened a rally at Tswelopele hall in Pimville zone 7. A wave of agitation permeated through the gathering, which influenced the attendants to march to councillor George Ndlovu's house in ward 22. Councillor Ndlovu with his family was held at ransom and the electricity box of his house was ransacked.... The incident prompted the branches of the ANC in both wards to convene a special joint forum in the evening wherein a vigorous debate ensued on the political challenges posed by SECC ... [which] has successfully earned the respect from the community and thus the ANC could no longer tread willy-nilly in every territory....

In the initial stages of community mobilization, the key message from these forces was that the ANC in power has not only abandoned its historical constituency (i.e. the working class and poor), but has begun to unleash terror against it. This terror—they argue—is in the form of electricity and water cuts conducted against the weak and poor. Electricity cuts that intensified during the winter of 2002 were presented as naked savagery unleashed by a liberation movement against its people who are largely destitute ... these struggles have resulted into an open confrontation like the shooting between employees of Eskom and residents of Dlamini in Soweto in the year 2001. Such readiness and agitation for extreme action is encapsulated in Duduzile Mphenyeki's (SECC secretary) statement when proclaiming that "In every struggle there are casualties." In explaining Operation Khanyisa the SECC has stated in some of its public forums that people must chase away Eskom "agents" tasked to cut electricity cables with whatever means necessary and that "councillors must be made to taste their own medicines"....

The Pimville rally mandated the SECC to expand its scope of demands beyond electricity cuts and to begin to include a demand for houses, a stop to eviction/relocation, and access to free basic water among other issues. This is essentially a call to develop a broad united front that goes beyond SECC and the electricity issue.... [The Anti-Privatization] Forum also creates the imperative link between the shop floor struggles against right-sizing (retrenchments), casualization of labour, and the struggles waged against water and electricity cuts in the townships. As a result, the APF synchronizes the struggles waged by SECC, Dobsonville Civic Association (DCA) against electricity and water cuts in Soweto with those fought by among others SAMWU [South African Municipal Workers' Union] on the shop-floor against retrenchments, as a result of privatization ... trade unionists have played key roles in some of the APF campaigns and marches. It is this ability to link these cuts of services and electricity to privatization that creates a strong and broader appeal—not only to ordinary residents but trade unionists, intellectuals, and development activists—and the capacity to make inroads within the frontiers of the Tripartite Alliance.¹⁷

This is an extraordinary admission of the SECC's community popularity as well as the sophisticated way the new movement expanded its organizing reach and agenda. Subsequent years were spent in issue linkage. The APF and SECC adopted socialism as their "official" vision. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in August 2002 also helped raise the SECC's profile. A memorable *Mail & Guardian* front page on 16 August framed elderly SECC stalwart Florence Nkwashu in front of riot police with the headline "We'll take Sandton!" Two weeks later, the SECC was central to the memorable 30,000-strong march from Alexandra to Sandton, the largest post-1994 protest in South Africa aside from trade union mobilizations. The

17 Fafuli, T. (2003), "Beyond dreadlocks and demagogy," *Umrabulo*, 18 June.

“Big March” was roughly ten times larger than one aimed at supporting the WSSD (by the ANC, trade unions and churches) held along the same route later that day.

To the outside observer, that 2002 demonstration was the peak for many of the “New Social Movements” that emerged since the late 1990s. For the SECC, there were several years ahead in which attention shifted to water rights, culminating in the victories against prepayment meters and inadequate free supplies in 2008. In its journey it has faced many challenges including organizational crises due to internal political differences. It has set itself new challenges including running candidates in the 2006 local government elections where it won one seat in the Johannesburg City Council, which it uses to amplify its campaigns to a broader audience. Recently it helped form an electoral front of community and left organizations to run candidates in the national elections on a red-green platform, but lacked the finances required to formally register.¹⁸

CLIMATE PRIVATIZATION

Meanwhile, the SA government’s own stumbling attempts to address electricity shortages and the worsening climate crisis provided further opportunities for communities to link energy access and CO₂ emissions campaigning. The government appeared co-opted by the Minerals Energy Complex—the phrase that captures the fusion of state, mining houses, and heavy industry—especially in beneficiating metallic and mineral products through smelting. As Ben Fine and Zav Rustomjee showed, throughout the twentieth century, mining, petro-chemicals, metals, and related activities that have historically accounted for around a quarter of the GDP typically consumed 40 percent of all electricity, at the world’s cheapest rates. David McDonald updates and regionalizes the concept a decade later in his edited book, *Electric Capitalism*, finding an “MEC-plus”: “South Africa’s appetite for electricity has created something of a ‘scramble’ for the continent’s electricity resources, with the transmission lines of today comparable to the colonial railway lines of the late 1800s and early 1900s, physically and symbolically.”¹⁹

Eskom fostered a debilitating dependence on the (declining) mining industry, causing a “Dutch disease,” in memory of the damage done to Holland’s economic balance by its cheap North Sea oil, which, in South Africa’s case, is cheap but very dirty coal. As one study found, South Africa is “the most vulnerable fossil fuel exporting country in the world” if the Kyoto Protocol is fully extended (because of the need to make deep cuts).²⁰

Eskom is amongst the worst emitters of CO₂ in the world when corrected for income and population size, putting South Africa’s emissions far higher than even the

18 The Socialist Green Coalition’s platform is available at <http://www.sgc.org.za/>

19 McDonald, D. (Ed) (2008), *Electric Capitalism*, Cape Town, Human Sciences Research Council Press.

20 Spalding-Fecher, A. (2000), “The Sustainable Energy Watch Indicators 2001,” Energy for Development Research Centre, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.

energy sector of the United States—*by a factor of twenty*.²¹ To deal with this legacy, the government adopted a *Long-Term Mitigation Scenario* in mid-2008, to great fanfare, calling for cuts in CO₂, but beginning in 2050. Meanwhile, the rollout of at least a \$100 billion worth of new coal-fired plants ensued. Moreover, the 2004 National Climate Change Response Strategy endorsed carbon trading, specifically the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), declaring “up-front that CDM primarily presents a range of commercial opportunities, both big and small.” The carbon trading gimmick allows Northern firms to buy World Bank Prototype Carbon Fund investment allowances in CDM projects so they can continue emitting at species-threatening rates, instead of cutting emissions.

The October 2004 “Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading”²² rejected the claim that this strategy will halt the climate crisis, insisting that the crisis is caused by the mining of fossil fuels and the release of their carbon to the oceans, air, soil, and living things, and must be stopped at source. By August 2005, inspiring citizen activism in Durban's Clare Estate community forced the municipality to withdraw an application to the World Bank for carbon trading finance to include methane extraction from the vast Bisasar Road landfill, which community activists insisted should instead be closed. The leading advocate, long-time resident Sajida Khan, died two years later, but her struggle to halt the “privatization of the air,” as carbon trading is known, lives on. The only way forward on genuine climate change mitigation is to leave fossil fuels in the earth.

Hence “Keep the oil in the soil” and “Leave the coal in the hole” are regular slogans of African energy activists ranging from the South Durban critics of deadly petrol refining in residential communities to the Niger Delta critics of deadly petrol extraction from residential communities. The hard work of winning more civil society organizations to this position, especially organized labor, continues. A Nigerian journalist explains:

Human rights activists from across the African continent that converged in Durban, South Africa recently for a conference which was convened by Oilwatch Africa and GroundWork South Africa have warned that Africa is facing another round of colonisation that threatens livelihoods and ecology. The thrust of the conference was the renewed focus on Africa as one of the fastest growing sources of oil and gas for the global markets amidst tightening oil supplies, spike in oil prices, low sulphur content of the oil found in Africa and an equally growing appetite for fuel by emerging global economic powers like China, India and Korea.... Nnimmo Bassey, executive director Environmental Rights Action and Friends of the Earth Nigeria included in his presentation entitled “The Future of Crude Oil is Already History” a profile of the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta in the last 50 years, stressing that fallouts of oil exploration include socio-economic displacement of the locals, pollution-induced sicknesses and violent conflicts in the region.... Ivonne Yanez, co-

21 International Energy Agency (2000a), “CO₂ Emissions from Fuel Combustion, 1971–1998,” Paris; International Energy Agency (2000b), “Key World Energy Statistics from the IEA,” Paris.

22 The Durban Declaration on Carbon Trading was adopted by civil society organizations that met in Durban in October 2004, with the specific aim of halting the carbon trade as a “false solution” to the climate crisis.

ordinator of Oilwatch South America, explained that an initiative on keeping the oil underground, was taking place in Yasuni Forest Reserve ... in Ecuador. Calling on Oilwatch Africa member countries to emulate the Yasuni struggle since the human and environmental costs of fossil fuel extraction far outweighs any gain that accrues from it. Activists from countries such as Ghana, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mauritius, among others also took time to share their ugly experiences. All were unanimous that oil extraction activities as shown in the cases of the Niger Delta or Angola, South America and several other places have been a curse rather than blessing to the indigenous people under whose soil oil is being tapped.²³

In addition to campaigning against fossil fuel extraction, South African environmental activists insist on higher renewable energy subsidies to kick start the solar, tidal, and other methods of harnessing the country's vast potential resources. However, less than 10 percent of state R&D spending on energy went to renewables since 1994 (compared to 90 percent for nuclear).

CONCLUSION

Reviewing this complex terrain of energy and social activism leaves us with several conclusions about the prospects for decommodifying electricity for poor people and shifting the generation to renewable production in a red-green synthesis:

- South Africa became more unequal during the late 1990s, as a million jobs were lost due largely to the stagnant economy, the flood of imports and capital/energy-intensive investment that displaced workers (especially in the strike-rich manufacturing sector)—and these trends had enormously negative implications for the ability of low-income citizens to afford electricity;
- billions of Rands in state subsidies are spent on capital-intensive energy-guzzling smelters, where profit and dividend outflows continue to adversely affect the currency;
- the price of electricity charged to mining and smelter operations is the lowest in the world;
- little is being spent on renewable energy research and development, especially compared to a dubious nuclear program;
- greenhouse gas emissions per person, corrected for income, are amongst the most damaging anywhere, and have grown worse since liberation;
- electricity coverage is uneven, and, despite expansion of coverage, millions of people have had their electricity supplies cut due to commercialization and privatization.

²³ Chimeziri, U. (2008), "Activists demand end to oil exploration in Africa," *Financial Standard News*, 5 October.

All of these problems are being countered by critiques from civil society. However, most challenging is the paucity of constructive *collective* work carried out between the three major activist networks that have challenged government policy and corporate practices: environmentalists, community groups, and trade unions. This is partly due to serious political setbacks suffered by progressive forces, including internecine divisions and material differences in class interests.

Overcoming these will require a highly-enhanced politics that must be able to reconcile differences of interest between the various sectors of civil society. What unites is the certainty that if the capitalist destruction of the environment is allowed to continue all are sunk. There is a need to challenge the power of capital because, while the rule of profit dominates the world, all solutions tend to fall flat. Humanity needs to stop digging out the coal and re-employ coal miners in socially-useful activities. The truth is that this will be next to impossible to implement unless power shifts to the hands of ordinary people and away from the monied elite.

In South Africa, the ANC's pro-capitalist policy means that wasteful white elephant projects continue: the Coega industrial complex; the expansion of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project mega-dams; huge new soccer stadiums for the 2010 World Soccer Cup; the corruption-ridden R43 billion arms deal; and the R20 billion+ Gautrain elite fast rail network. To these we can add the multi-billion rand nuclear and coal power stations that Eskom plans to build.

In contrast, activists will have to intensify their work, to get any of the spending the society requires redirected into providing a sufficient minimum free basic supply of electricity, into rolling out the power grid to unserved rural areas as well as to Southern African societies who have long contributed cheap labor to South African mines, and to cutting back CO₂ emissions via major state investments in renewables. But if the apparent impossibility of acquiring AIDS medicines from 2000–03 or reversing water privatization in 2006–08 are useful examples, these are the kinds of challenges that compel South African activists to rise up and shout, “Amandla!” (Power!)—“Awethu!” (To the People!)