



GLOBALISATION, MARGINALISATION & NEW SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

A joint project between the Centre for Civil Society and the
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Queries: Richard Ballard (Project Manager) • School of
Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban,
4041 ballardr@ukzn.ac.za • Tel 031 2602266 • Fax 031 2602359



The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee

Anthony Egan and Alex Wafer

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Anthony Egan S.J. lectures in Applied Ethics at St Augustine College of South Africa, having studied history and politics at the Universities of Cape Town (MA) and Witwatersrand (PhD), philosophy at the University of London and theology at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass.

Alex Wafer is a researcher currently working at the French Institute of South Africa as well as the Independent Development Trust. He is completing a master's degree in Urban Geography at the University of Witwatersrand.

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UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Young men illegally reconnect the electricity supplies of householders and shop-owners in Soweto – on one occasion they even reconnect a police station. 25 000 people march from Alexandra Township to Sandton to protest the way in which the Johannesburg World Summit on Social Development has seemingly been ‘hijacked’ by ‘the rich and powerful’. Activists from Soweto meet with comrades from Chatsworth and delegates from the Indian Dalit Peoples’ Movement and join in a march in Durban that is larger than the ‘official’ African National Congress/Tripartite Alliance rally at the World Conference Against Racism. The Annual General Meeting of two allied movements in Diepkloof combine populist socialism and religious revivalism. And eighty-seven activists – many of them elderly pensioners – are arrested after shots are fired when the protesters try to disconnect the Mayor of Johannesburg’s electricity, becoming in the process ‘the first political prisoners of neoliberalism’ in the eyes, at least, of the international resistance movement to globalisation (Resist, 2002).

These historical snippets, these snapshots of struggle, illustrate in brief many of the themes and issues, personalities, alliances and collective contentious actions of a small but significant social movement organisation (SMO) of protest, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). While focused on a limited issue – provision of affordable (where possible free) electricity to the poor of Soweto – SECC discourse and praxis links access to services to a critique of economic globalisation and advocacy for democratic socialism. Still largely under-researched (except in MacInnes, n.d.; and *passim* in Desai, 2002, and Kingsnorth, 2003), it has had, we shall argue, an uneven yet disproportionate impact on South African society precisely through its ability to network with likeminded organisations and activists.

Yet such a story is only partly complete. The SECC is not one organisation; it is a highly complex and heterogeneous movement, containing moments of strong cohesion and survivalist solidarity, as well as a series of tensions and cleavages; small and imprecise in size, it manages to mobilise considerable public and media attention (hence Cerruti’s clumsily poetic idea (2002:45) of a ‘mini-mass movement’); organised into over twenty branches across Soweto, it seems at times almost anarchic in structure; born and sustained out of a ‘new left’ ideology, it remains pluralist, comprising anarchists, ANC supporters and everyday church-goers. In an attempt to understand it more clearly, this chapter will explore some of these tensions through considering the origins of the SECC, the competing identities and ideologies that are forged through the SECC, and the strategies and logistics of mobilising a ‘mini-mass movement’.

Our methodology in this report has been fairly simple. Since our hope has been to give the SECC its own voice, we have relied heavily on a combination of original source documents of the movement, interviews with its leaders, members and grassroots

supporters and participant observation. We have spoken with SECC members, attended their rallies and meetings. We have visited public halls and private homes, tried to listen to SECC speeches (not always easy since much of the conversation is in Zulu). In all of this we have consciously avoided trying to influence SECC's policies and direction: we do not share Touraine's notion of 'social intervention' (1981: 139-222). Such a notion, in our opinion, would only have skewed our research, trying to fit SECC into our research concerns rather than letting SECC inform our research. It would also appear patronising.

Given the nature of the subject, and the strong perception among SECC members that they – together with other members of the new social movements in South Africa – might be victims of government, police or ANC harassment and intimidation, we decided in most cases not to use their full names. In some cases names have been changed. For similar reasons we have avoided using specific dates and places of interviews.

In one sense we have been very lucky: the SECC has been more than willing to talk with us and to share documentation. This is by no means a given with social movements, as Kriesi (1992) points out: Social movements, especially protest movements, are often suspicious of researchers and the uses to which research may be put by both states and counter-movements. We have also tried to speak to the Electricity Supply Commission (ESKOM) but have had no luck in getting interviews. We cannot say whether this was due to hostility, lack of time on ESKOM's part, or our lack of persistence. In addition we have spoken with activists within other social movements (notably Keep Left) to get their views of the SECC.

We have also searched the databases of various newspapers (notably *Mail and Guardian*, *Sowetan*, *Star*) and done extensive web searches that have revealed how widespread publicity about SECC has become. SECC has, through the Web and through publications of journalists and activists committed to opposing globalization and defending social democracy, become a part of not only a national but also an international social movement universe.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING SECC

Social movements are objects constructed by the researcher, which do not necessarily coincide with the empirical form of collective action. Seen from the outside, they may present a certain degree of unity, but internally they are always heterogeneous, diverse (Jelin, quoted in Escobar and Alvarez, 1992).

Studying any social movement always entails an epistemological and ideological decision, not least since early 'collective behaviour' approaches tended to be unsympathetic and rooted in assumptions about 'group pathology' of mobs (e.g. Hoffer, 1951). Movements were seen as 'little more than the most well-organized and self-conscious part of an archipelago of 'emergent' phenomena, ranging from fads and rumors, to collective enthusiasms, riots, movements, and revolutions' (Tarrow, 1998:14). Such an approach generated a theoretically poor ideological and moral prejudice against social movements. Social movements were predominantly seen as political and social agents that were outside of the sphere of traditional civil society (Crosley, 2002: 10).

Much of the recent discussion about social movements emerged following the events of 1968, firstly in Europe and later America and other parts of the world. The era of popular protest that began in Paris in 1968 targeted what Habermas has called the '*colonisation of life-worlds*' (Habermas 1981: 2). These protests represented a new social phenomenon because they did not seem to neatly fit the social cleavages such as class that had traditionally dominated European sociology (Crosley 2002:149). The *new* social movements that emerged contested what Touraine called the *historicity* of society (Touraine 1981: 77). Castells similarly argued that social movements represent 'non-class, social movements challenging the structure of a class society' (Castells 1983: 300). Charles Tilly's (1984) classic definition of 'social movement' as a sustained series of interactions between the state and challenging groups is as useful a starting point as any, but needs some further clarity. Is a 'challenging group' *always* a social movement, however small and localised, whether club, political party or church? One might argue that we should exclude political parties from the equation because their methods tend to focus on a 'constitutional' or 'parliamentary road' to social change (assuming they are not banned).

The first real attempts to understand social movements in the so-called global South were in Latin America in the 1970s, attempting to understand the position of the South in the world system. Early theorists were influenced strongly by the structuralist arguments that had come from the European tradition, but were also concerned with the developmentalist and material realities of third world societies. The social movements that emerged in Latin American cities in the 1970s and 1980s were concerned with the material conditions of urban life, yet theorists were struck with the relative lack of class identity that accompanied these struggles (Escobar and Alvarez 1992). In trying to understand this, Touraine (1981) defines a social movement as 'the organized collective behaviour of a class actor struggling against his class adversary for the social control of historicity in a concrete community'. This could be simplified into a theory of social movement as collective action by a group of social movement *organizations* (SMOs) and likeminded individuals working for some kind of political and social change. This allows the possibility for a greater diversity of actors and ideological positions within a coalition, and also helps account for such phenomena as non-affiliated supporters and bourgeois intellectuals within SMOs (often figures outside the broad social class of the SMO membership), as well as the possibility for counter-movements to social change, including members from the very social classes the social movement seeks to mobilise. Such an approach seems useful for our discussion of SECC as a movement that includes a range of activists and supporters outside of strictly class-based categories. Equally, the SECC is opposed by groups and individuals – trade unionists, socialists, and many 'poor people' of Soweto. Our understanding of SECC is as a social movement organization (SMO), a localised and relatively organised part of a broader movement against the privatisation of public utilities and the 'cost recovery' policies of local government in post-Apartheid South Africa. The SECC frames its collective action, at least in part, around an ideology of resistance to neoliberal economic globalisation and commitment to a broadly defined socialism, although as we will argue, the SECC remains an internally complex and diverse organisation.

[...] social movements are 'plural and diversified', 'un-representable and unpredictable', and 'express a qualitatively new level of the struggle, a level in which life itself is the stake' ... which threaten not only state control but also the established left's understanding of struggle and politics (Greenstein 2003: 12).

Greenstein suggests that the radical potential of the post Apartheid social movements lies in the places from which they emerge, rather than in the traditional spaces of so-called civil society (Greenstein 2003: 13). He argues that these movements represent the struggles of people in their daily lives, and cannot (and should not) be translated into mass-based political organisations. Castells made similar arguments with regards the urban movements in Madrid in the late 1970s (Castells 1983: 221). Desai (2003: 8) has been concerned to see the new 'Poors' as a potential social force in post Apartheid South Africa:

[The Poors] have come to constitute the most relevant post 1994 social force from the point of view of challenging the prevailing political economy. The community movements have challenged the very boundaries of what for a short while after the demise of the Apartheid state was seen exclusively as 'politics' (Desai 2003: 8).

Desai focuses on the problem of poverty, essential service cut-offs and protests near Durban, linking these movements to public disillusionment with the 'total capitulation' of the ANC to neo-liberalism and globalisation (Desai 2003). He further argues that the states inability or unwillingness to provide basic services have created the context for these movements to emerge. For many of these movements, it is the family that forms the primary organisational unit, fighting not simply against individual policies or particular rights but for a new distribution of power in society. This view, that the broken promises of 1994 have spawned these movements, is pervasive. Having argued that the ANC has always been a petty bourgeois organisation, McKinley suggests that the policy shifts away from the RDP were inevitable (McKinley 1997). Whether or not this is accurate, it seems that social movements in post-Apartheid South Africa have emerged in response to shifts in policy and material realities, causing political division amongst community organisations and contesting the nature of local democracy.

3. CONTEXTUALISING SECC: THE POLITICS OF SERVICE PROVISION

Globalisation generates interconnectedness and disconnectedness, inclusion and exclusion (Castells, 1998). Through a revolution in communication technology people are able to communicate much faster with each other – so long as they have the technology. Multinationals are able to move capital, goods and services much faster than before. And we have moved into a post-industrial, post-assembly line economy, where information itself has become the primary tool. Space and time have become more compressed than ever before as a result of all this interconnectivity. Politics, together with notions of the state, sovereignty and autonomy, has been at once globalised – and localised: no national state can ignore the demands and logics of the global economy, indeed the hegemony (or near-hegemony) of multinational capital. National economies that seek to enter the global market are subjected to rigorous structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) by the 'regulators' of the global economy (notably the WB, IMF and WTO) that have the effect of cutting back on free or heavily subsidised essential services that meet basic needs, undermine progressive labour legislation, reduce progressive taxation and allow the free flow of money between countries. Yet technologies that make the globalisation of capital possible make possible the worldwide resistance movement that has emerged in response to what is seen as dehumanising global capital and the homogenisation of culture that has accompanied it. It gives small SMOs like SECC a global profile that belies its size and

relative parochialism. The SECC, along with a number of other so-called new social movements that have emerged in the years after Apartheid, has emerged in the context of globalisation and its unequal impact on South African society; unemployment, economic marginality and increasing urban poverty. It would be too crude to argue that the emergence and existence of these movements is simply a product of these impacts, but if it is possible to define a moment when the SECC was born, then it was at the protests of the launching of Igoli 2002, the policy package aimed at making the Johannesburg Metro Council financially viable.

Post-apartheid development in South Africa has undergone a number of shifts in emphasis since 1994. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (ANC, 1994) emphasised a relatively progressive set of welfare-oriented policies, and against 'Apartheid created infrastructure disparities' (ANC, 1994: section 2.3.5). In the extension of electricity and water services, the RDP proposed free lifeline tariffs, cross-subsidisation from areas with higher rates bases, and a National Electricity Fund underwritten by government. Tariff structures were to reflect 'relative affordability'. Crucial to the success of the RDP was the 'democratisation of the state and society'; local governments were to be responsible for delivery of services, for drawing up programmes to extend service networks, and for engaging local communities in dialogue.

Rooted in a similar initial concern for democratisation, the outcome of the debates about the future of local government after Apartheid was the set of policies that comprised Developmental Local Government (DLG). Conceived as a tool for 'dismantling the Apartheid city', the framework is limited in its effectiveness by the demands for full cost recovery and non-cross subsidisation (South African Government 1998). The conceptualisation of DLG was informed by the constitutional requirements for poverty targeting, growth, sustainability and participation (Government 1998). DLG is described as "the dynamic way in which local councils work together with local communities to find sustainable ways to meet their needs and improve their lives" (South African Government 1998: section 1.1). In reality the DLG structures differ little from the municipal structures of Apartheid, extended to incorporate previously under-serviced areas. The hierarchy of government structures also hinders the ability of DLG to make spending decisions (Beall *et al* 2003: 65). The establishment of Metro Councils, which for the first time included the residents of the city into one administrative and political structure, while realising on some levels the dream of a non-racial city, entrenched a bureaucratic and corporatist attitude towards urban governance (Beall *et al* 2003: 65). Accordingly, the spatial ordering of the city continued to marginalize certain sectors of the urban population.

After 1996 ANC economic policy shifted progressively towards the more growth-oriented Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy which sought to balance social development, the demands of joining a highly competitive global market and the often conflicting stakeholder interests of the ANC's supporters (Friedman, 2001; 2004). To some GEAR was regarded as a 'neo-liberal inspired policy package', though Bond (2000: 92-3) argues that the 'depolicitising [of] civil society' began even in the RDP, which assumed that local government is an effective tool of delivery. Arguably, the shifts in policy that accompanied GEAR have had unequal impact in terms of benefitting the majority of South Africans. The poorest 50% of South Africans continue to receive only 3.3% of the national income and 45% are considered poor to very poor (Terreblanche, 2003; Department of Social Development, 2002). Although GEAR certainly represented, in the context of a financial crisis and the government's desire to bring South Africa more

fully into a global market, an attempt to reduce budget deficits and reduce public spending, it remained ultimately 'an expression of the balance between the interests [from the black business class to the poor] which comprise the governing alliance' (Friedman, 2001: 10). Some deny that GEAR is to blame for the economic woes of the country, pointing out that poverty and unequal wealth distribution is rooted in the lethal cocktail of poor education and high unemployment (Bruggemans 2003). Young people lack the marketable skills. Laid off workers in sectors undergoing cutbacks lack the facilities for retraining. Moreover the culture of work has changed dramatically, from one based on regular hours, job stability and following fairly mechanistic procedures to emphasis on flexibility of time, innovation and multitasking. Whatever the truth of these claims, what is clear is a very high level of poverty: 45-55 per cent of the population is considered to be poor to very poor (Terreblanche, 2003; Department of Social Development, 2002).

In Johannesburg this policy shift was manifested in Igoli 2002. Following the 1997 budgetary crisis of the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, service delivery was reorganised into self-contained 'utility' companies (like City Power) that would have to make themselves financially viable. Local government service provision in water and electricity has shifted to a policy of cost recovery, backed up by the threat and exercise of disconnection of defaulters. This is allegedly because such policies maintain sustainable and affordable pricing regimes in the industry (Clark & Drimie, 2002). Yet the extent of the 'energy crisis' that existed in Soweto in the 1990s was summed up by Fiil-Flynn (2001). About 89% of households were (to varying degrees) in arrears. Electricity cut-offs (reaching a rate of 20 000 households per month in 2001) were occurring, leading to health, safety and human risks, not to mention damage to small businesses. Many Sowetans felt that energy supply conditions under Eskom were worse than five years before, and that government had failed to deliver on its commitments of 'free electricity'. Many Sowetans favoured a standardised 'flat rate' electricity charge. In 2001 SECC advocated a rate of R50 per month (Fiil-Flynn, 2001:28). Recent research has suggested that far from a culture of non-payment among many defaulters, many South Africans simply cannot pay for electricity and water (Bond et al, 2002; McDonald & Pape, 2002; Khunou, 2002; Fiil-Flynn, 2001).

A key feature of the 1994 transition to democracy was the strong commitment to human rights on the part of all parties, and in particular the ANC. The Constitution and its Bill of Rights (1996) set the new state on a path away from the culture of censorship, political repression and extra-judicial violence that had characterised the old regime. Policing, defence and the judicial system required a human rights-based overhaul, something that has been pursued with mixed results: policing has been demilitarised, the defence system placed more firmly under Parliamentary/civilian oversight (as, perhaps to a lesser degree, has the intelligence gathering community). Yet firm commitment on paper has suffered from uneven implementation. Politically, too, there have been signs of greater ANC political hegemony in the legislatures and a tendency towards a more centralised ruling-party structure. Successive national elections have seen the consolidation of the ANC's power in parliament, its assimilation of some smaller parties, and the apparent relegation of opposition parties to a position of permanent, ineffectual opposition. Although there are sound reasons for this – the continuing popularity of the ANC, the failure of opposition parties to break out of racial or regional constituencies or offer significant or attractive alternatives – the effect has been the appearance of what seems like one-party dominance.

At the time of the democratic transition Eberhard and Van Horen (1995) stressed the importance of *equity*, energy conservation and the need for state involvement in development, particularly in state provision of essential services. Beyond the question of equity, they saw lack of access to energy, particularly electricity, as environmentally detrimental and dangerous to human well-being: people were forced to use wood as fuel in many areas (leading to deforestation) and paraffin was both poisonous and ran the high risk of fires. Extensive electrification was the most practical solution (1995: 88-148). Moreover strict market economics had failed to provide adequate energy services; the state therefore had to intervene to prevent market failures and 'to achieve greater equity in access to desirable energy services' (1995:183), developing a coordinated, integrated energy policy. In brief, energy had to be cheap. With the demise of the RDP millions of homes of the disadvantaged were electrified, but adequate quantities of free or very cheap electricity was not forthcoming, despite election promises.

Two conflicting understandings of human development emerge here. Some studies, like that of Clark and Drimie (2002), while acknowledging the difficulties the poor had in paying for energy, rejected the notion of energy subsidies, arguing that it would push electricity prices up 50%, and that ESKOM by 2000 had succeeded in reducing the real price of electricity by 15% (2002: 10, 22). Crucially they missed whether the poor could actually afford to pay the existing prices, even if they were in fact cheaper. This point was raised time and again by critics of energy policy, like Bond (Bond et al, 2002), McDonald and Pape (2002) and Fiil-Flynn (2001), who argued that energy costs were simply too high for the poor, and that the policy of cut-offs, whether of water or electricity, was a human disaster undermining sustainable development. In spite of all the earlier principles (and occasional campaign promises) of equity, cut offs of basic services in various parts of the country have occurred. The poor were sometimes forced to pay more for electricity than the wealthy and big business. Environmental pollution has not decreased and a number of disease outbreaks, some fatal, have been blamed on the cut off policies. (Bond, et al 2002:301-354).

In a controversial HSRC research report (McDonald & Pape, 2002), drawing on case studies from around the country, the authors concluded that the ability to pay for services is beyond the means of the majority of South Africans and has reached crisis point. In a study of Diepkloof, Soweto, Grace Khunou (2002:61-80) argued that ESKOM's cut-off policy had been inefficient and inconsistent (as had its billing process), and had taken little notice of the affordability of electricity for residents. Many residents polled considered the ANC and the pro-ANC South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) as allies of ESKOM and irrelevant to their struggles. Some residents have as a result aligned themselves to new social movements like the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee – just as others have joined similar movements protesting against energy, water and other services privatisation elsewhere in the country. The research findings have been challenged as to their factual accuracy and research methodology, particularly in terms of the numbers of electricity and water cut-offs they claim.

Moreover the 'official' ANC and SACP response to this research has been to attack it as representing the thinking of the supposedly 'ultra left' new social movements, whose position is both unrealistic given the context and unpatriotic in 'undermining' the 'progressive' policies of the government (Nzimande, 2003; ANC Political Education Unit, 2002; Makhaye, 2002; Moleketi & Jele, 2002).

4. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOWETO ELECTRICITY CRISIS COMMITTEE

It is within this context that the SECC emerged. For his opposition to Igoli 2002 SECC figurehead Trevor Ngwane was dismissed from his post as ANC councillor in Pimville, Soweto (Haffajee, 2001). He subsequently was involved with 'a series of workshops [in Soweto] on the energy crisis' (Ngwane, 2003: 46), out of which emerged the primary organised constituency of the SECC. At the same time, in downtown Johannesburg a series of protests were organised around the Urban Futures conference held at Witwatersrand University in June 2000. Here, a number of activists linked up with academics and staff of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs) and the Municipal Services Project. Together, they would forge the SECC's public profile under the auspices of an umbrella body the Anti Privatisation Forum (APF). SECC became 'one of the most active members' of the APF (Interview with Trevor Ngwane, 2003) combining conventional protest actions with illegal reconnections ('Operation Khanyisa'). Within six months, SECC had reconnected over 3000 households (Ngwane, 2003:47).

4.1 Early Campaigns of the SECC

The decision of ESKOM to go ahead with aggressive 'cost recovery' in Soweto led to the SECC decision to combine protest action with illegal reconnections. ESKOM insisted that it could not cover the losses it incurred through Soweto residents defaulting on electricity payments: the R1-billion to R1.2-billion debts simply had to be collected (Daniels, 2001a; Kindra, 2001b). With equal vehemence, the SECC insisted that most Soweto residents simply could not pay their debts, a claim that the Queen's University Municipal Services Project backed up with startling evidence. In a survey conducted with households in Pimville and Orlando East, it found that 62% of the main breadwinners in homes were either pensioners (40%) or unemployed (22%) and that 40% of households had a family income of less than R1000 per month (Fiil-Flynn, 2001:11-13).

Soweto residents also resented the perceived haphazard and unjust manner in which ESKOM conducted itself. Many received two electricity bills a month, one from the local council and another from ESKOM's head office. Others received bills for electricity they had not used, since they had already been cut off or had never been connected, with ESKOM officials allegedly taking bribes from residents not to cut them off if they fell into arrears, or to illegally reconnect them for R1000 (Daniels, 2001b). Where cut offs occurred they were frequently of whole areas, not discriminating between those who paid their bills and those who did not. Business-people complained that the cut offs were ruining their businesses; even clinics were cut off. ANC local councillors seemed also unable or unwilling to do anything.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a member of the ANC's Tripartite Alliance, launched a withering attack on the Department of Public Enterprises and its proposed steamrolling of electricity privatisation (through the Eskom Conversion Bill). Pointing out that this 'restructuring' would cause the cost of electricity to rise by between 22% and 50%, they accused the Department of Public Enterprises of acting in bad faith and reneging on the ANC electoral promises of free electricity. Patrick Bond called for the provision of electricity on a free lifeline basis. He cited the landmark 'Grootboom decision'¹ and defended the idea of cross-subsidisation 'from the wasteful

¹ . The Western Cape Constitutional Court *Grootboom vs. the Republic of South Africa* (2000) case found that '[a] society must seek to ensure that the basic necessities of life are provided to all if it is to be a society based on dignity, freedom and equality'. Such necessities it argued would include 'services such as water,

luxury users, as well as from large firms that use most of the country's electricity' (Kindra, 2001a; for an earlier perspective see Fine & Rustonjee, 1996: esp. 8-9, 82, 155, 160, 229). Given the relatively low costs of energy for large South African firms, it made sense for them to pay a bit more so that society did not keep paying the human and environmental cost for those who could not afford electricity (in Kindra, 2001a). SECC deputy chairperson Virginia Setshedi was more blunt in her condemnation: 'Instead of uplifting our lives, government is taking us down' (Daniels, 2001b).

ESKOM denied that its cut offs were indiscriminate and that its billing was incorrect – though it agreed to introduce a new, more streamlined billing process. Though it acknowledging isolated cases of corruption, which it had dealt with most severely, it insisted that these were isolated. In short, debts had to be repaid. There would be no compromise.

4.2 Operation Khanyisa: Illegal Reconnections.

In response SECC launched 'Operation Khanyisa' ('switch on'): illegal reconnection of houses by trained local members to do the reconnections – at no charge (interviews with SECC activists; interview with Ngwane, 2003; cf Ngwane, 2003). Within six months, SECC had reconnected over 3000 households (Ngwane, 2003:47) The SECC re-connectors did not discriminate between SECC members and non-members, between rich and poor: one re-connector even claims to have re-connected Moroka Police Station. Over the years, reconnection has taken on a high degree of sophistication (interview with Dale McKinley, 2003).

The 'battle' between SECC and ESKOM led to a deadlock. In October 2001, ESKOM announced a moratorium on cut offs. On 30 November 2001, Minister of Public Enterprise Jeff Radebe had spoken at ESKOM's Megawatt Park headquarters to a gathering that included Amos Masondo, the Mayor of Johannesburg, the Chair, the CEO and executives of ESKOM and City Councillors. He'd stressed the importance of electricity for development, the need for it by South African citizens and the problems of its cost for those who were poor. He noted public concern about the billing process and recommended changes in this regard. In the middle of the speech, however, he launched into a direct attack on the SECC, calling them part of a 'criminal culture' and having a radical anti-ANC agenda.

The representatives of this committee have proven themselves that they will do anything, including telling lies to the community, in order to realise its political ends. Such people cannot be regarded as the genuine representatives of our people. (Radebe, 2001)

Radebe then proposed what was in effect a compromise: punishment of ESKOM's own illegal re-connecters, reform of the billing process and 'normalisation' of the electricity crisis through an amnesty for those who reported illegal reconnections, and a willingness

sewage, electricity...' *Grootboom vs. Republic of South Africa* 2000 (11) BCLR 1169. How far the Grootboom decision could be applied was controversial. Geoff Budlender of the Legal Resources Centre believed that there was 'no constitutional right to electricity' but that residents could sue ESKOM on matters of procedure (Daniels, 2001). Later legal opinion has suggested that though there might be a problem with a direct appeal to Grootboom, the 'equality clauses' in the Constitution might be used to pressure ESKOM to pursue a process of cross-subsidisation of electricity costs (simply put, the wealthy would subsidise the poor through higher tariffs): cf. Roux & Vahle, 2002.

to set aside 50% of the residents' arrears. He framed this proposal in terms of what he saw as his 'twin responsibilities' – 'to protect the interests of both the community and ESKOM'.

When Radebe made his offer to Soweto in December 2001 it was turned down. The SECC made its demands clear: electricity for everyone, including urban settlements and rural areas that still had to be electrified; scrapping all arrears; free basic supply of electricity and water the ANC had promised during the 2000 municipal elections campaign and a return to the flat-rate monthly pricing system that the community had managed to wrest from the apartheid regime in the 1980s. This was particularly galling to the SECC who saw 'in front of our eyes...a black bourgeoisie driving their fancy cars, living unrealistic lifestyles, all of them forgetting that they are what they are because of the struggles of ordinary workers and youth '(SECC/APF 1st Conference, 2-3 March 2002, 'Chairperson's Report').

In early 2002, the SECC attacked President Thabo Mbeki's call for unemployed youth to become volunteers in their communities, particularly police reservists. SECC members had long been volunteers, re-connecting residents' electricity:

The difference between Mbeki's volunteers and SECC volunteers is that if you volunteer for the SECC you are serving the working class community. Mbeki asks you to volunteer but he and his ministers get fat salaries each month. Tomorrow Mbeki's volunteers will be sent to attack the community, they will arrest you if you re-connect electricity for our grannies, they will escort the sheriff when he comes to evict you from your house. (SECC/APF, 2002, 'Chairperson's Report)

New alliances were formed with progressive labour unions (particularly the SA Municipal Workers Union, SAMWU) in the wake of the 2001 general strike. The movement also saw its task to participate in wider struggles over water ('Operation Vulamanzi') and housing ('Operation Buyel'ekhaya') – in short '[w]hen the ANC government fails to deliver we must deliver where it is possible.' SECC claimed it accommodated youth and workers irrespective of party affiliations and hinted at the need for a new mass party one that could 'give political direction and revolutionary shape to the anger felt by workers'(SECC/APF, 2002, 'Chairperson's Report').

4.3 The Kensington 87: A Defining Moment?

The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) made world headlines when, on 6 April 2002, a charter bus with nearly 100 members, many of them pensioners, arrived at the home of mayor of Johannesburg Amos Masondo to present a petition titled 'Fire the Mayor, fire the Councillors'. Masondo was away at the time. When the crowd tried to disconnect the mayor's electricity, an altercation with bodyguards turned into a minor riot. According to Masondo's spokesperson, the crowd tried to trash the property and a bodyguard fired shot at the crowd, wounding two people. Police arrested eighty-seven people after the incident, including SECC leader Trevor Ngwane and the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) organiser Rob Rees. While the African National Congress (ANC) government and the opposition Democratic Alliance agreed (for once!) that the demonstration deserved condemnation, smaller parties like the United Democratic Movement (UDM) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) saw the incident as an understandable if regrettable result of government's failure to fulfil its electoral promises of access to power for the poor. SAMWU also condemned the state's handling of the

incident, as did many local and global activist groups. Through the internet, socialist and broader anti-globalisation groups called on their members to express their solidarity with the ‘Kensington 87’ (or K87) and lobby the South African Government for their speedy release. (SAPA, 2002a; Salayedwa, 2002; Martorell, 2002; SAMWU, 2002) Released on bail from Diepkloof Prison a few days later – the official reason, delays in verifying the addresses of the accused, being seen by their supporters as nothing more than a pretext for harassing the K87 further – the trial dragged on for almost a year. On 5 March 2003 the case was dismissed; the court ruled that the testimony of Masondo’s bodyguard was unreliable, self-contradictory and incredible. If anything his actions had probably caused most of the disturbance. Among social movement activists it was seen as an example of the way the ANC used its power against grassroots activists opposed to its cynical, anti-poor attitudes (Anti-Privatisation Forum, 2003). For its part, the SECC and its allies used the trial and publicity as a vehicle to communicate its anti-privatisation and anti-cut offs message to a wider public. After his release on bail, Trevor Ngwane reaffirmed the SECC’s commitment to hold the ANC to its 2000 election promises of free water and electricity for the poor. He announced that the SECC would continue its marches, protests, boycotts and illegal reconnections of electricity in Soweto that it had initiated in ‘Operation Khanyisa’ in 2001. He stressed that ‘the rich’ should be charged for utilities, not poor people, and particularly not pensioners (SAPA, 2002b).

4.4 Beyond the K87: Growth and Diversification of the SECC

Whatever its grassroots members perceived – and many seem to have been focused quite narrowly on service provisions, inability to pay and hence live a decent human life² - the SECC leadership saw its role as part of a wider political mobilization and tried consistently to involve the rank and file in the ‘bigger picture’. Members were sent to workshops and attempts were made to educate residents about globalisation and privatisation. Others, even relative newcomers, were sent to big meetings like the Durban World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in August 2001 together with SECC stalwarts like Trevor Ngwane and Virginia Setshedi. This event was not simply a time for protest but also for coordination and organisation with other South African and global groups. The SECC met with the Westcliff Residents Association and the Dalit Peoples’ Movement of India in Chatsworth on August 25th 2001 to share their experiences of poverty and struggle, and participated in an eviction protest (Desai, 2002:128). The big event, however, was the August 31st march in Durban, in which the SECC participated. A number of marches occurred during the WCAR, some with official sanction. This march, however, did not have official approval and was almost stopped – but it went ahead and dwarfed the others in the number of participants. The event was to be repeated at the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development the following year.

The World Summit – dubbed the W\$SD by the activists – generated widespread conflict over what precisely constituted sustainable development. Representatives from the global Resistance community, many of whom had been to Porto Alegre in 2001, gathered at the University of the Witwatersrand for a conference of the International Forum on Globalisation (IFG). The social movements complained that the Summit had in effect been hijacked by states whose policies made service provisions to the poor unsustainable. Trevor Ngwane proposed a march to the newly named Johannesburg Central Police Station (formerly the notorious John Vorster Square) on 24 August 2002, but police stun

². As one interviewee commented to us, ‘You can’t go to church when you are dirty’.

grenades dispersed the crowd. Legal battles also erupted over a proposed march to the WSSD conference in Sandton from Alexandra township. It proceeded on 31 August, amidst a heavy police presence. As in Durban it was the largest single demonstration (some 25000 marchers) undertaken in South Africa in the post-1994 era.

In 2003 the SECC took its activism even further, removing and destroying pre-paid meters in Soweto (Ndaba,2003). They also started to expand their campaign to include all basic services beyond electricity – water, housing, healthcare, transport and education, with forays into protests against rising food prices. The SECC organised a mass meeting to inform and warn Soweto residents about the new ESKOM ‘card system’ and prepaid meters, as well as protest activities and meetings over the Johannesburg Water policies particularly in Phiri. They also led a protest march to Orange Farm on 21 March 2003 to protest ESKOM meter boxes, and participated in a number of anti-globalisation workshops and youth camps organised by the Cape Town-based AIDC.

Faced with widespread protest ESKOM backed down considerably in May 2003, writing off R1.4billion of debt accrued. Claimed by SANCO as its victory, one gained by levelheaded negotiations rather than protest, most observers seem to see it as a victory for the tactics of the SECC (Banda, 2003). Over and above local activism, SECC founder Trevor Ngwane went to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2003 (as he had done in 2001). Here, he stressed once again the need for global solidarity against global neoliberalism, and called for the defunding and decommissioning of the World Bank, adding that Africa-wide organisation and solidarity was needed (Bond, 2003).

5. INCLUSIONS AND EXCLUSIONS: CONSTITUTING THE SECC

The multiple stories of the origins of the SECC suggest something of the different identities and constituencies that make up the SECC. Perhaps most evident is the seeming gap between the politically organised and articulate members like Ngwane who form the leadership core, and the 'survivalist' members in Soweto who make up the membership at the local branch level. To suggest that this is a fundamental and deep seated cleavage would be an over-statement, but it does generate tensions within the organisation, and it poses specific challenges for mobilising a 'mini-mass movement'. In this section, then, we shall consider the SECC in terms of its structure, its day to day activities, and some of the competing identities that constitute the organisation.

5.1 Structure, leadership and members

Although the SECC would not collapse ‘if Trevor [Ngwane] got killed by a bus tomorrow’(interview with Clair Cerrutti, 2004; Ngwane concurs), his role has been crucial. A highly innovative leader with a strong flair for the dramatic (Alexander, 2003), Ngwane, together with his comrades within left intellectual circles, sections of the trade union movement and a number of grassroots activists, has put his stamp of leadership on the SECC. Although by no means an ivory tower theorist, Ngwane is clearly by virtue of his academic background a ‘traditional’ intellectual, though he has tried hard to avoid turning the SECC into a personal fiefdom. Political education about globalisation and neoliberalism, yet respect for the culture of the poors (illustrated by the commitment to vernacular languages and openness to popular religiosity) has been a hallmark of the SECC’s leadership. Reflecting the diverse beginnings of the SECC, the organisational structure has from very early on involved a heterogeneous membership, with varying

degrees of commitment to and engagement in the organization: core activists, some of them, like Ngwane, no longer holding official positions of leadership in SECC but nonetheless seen as its 'public face'; the (mostly young male) illegal re-connectors who operate deep in the communities and illegally re-connect electricity supplies for those who have been disconnected for defaulting; rank and file SECC branch members (mostly elderly women, the 'grannies of Soweto') who participate in the various branches, some of them holding positions on the executive, take part in the marches and protests, and who sporadically get sent to training workshops with SECC partner organisations.

Publicly the heart of the SECC is the small core of activists who operate from a small office at the Careers Centre community hall near Baragwanath hospital. Officially, office bearers are elected annually at the AGM, and include many newer members. Yet the founding members still maintain a large degree of influence in the leadership structure, often because they commit time and energy to maintain the momentum of the SECC, which at times threatens to splinter into its branches. Having no formal office, and in fact not even a card-carrying member of the organisation, Trevor Ngwane is nevertheless often regarded as de facto spokesperson of the SECC (Ngwane, 2003:47), particularly at international meetings of anti-globalization activists like the World Social Forum (Bond, 2003). He, together with a small core of activists, working on a single computer from the office at the Career Centre, arrange meetings, compile and distribute pamphlets to the local branches, organise recruitment initiatives and speak on behalf of a diverse and often elusive constituency. The channels of communication between the semi-autonomous branches³ and the Careers Centre office are never direct, often comprising a text message to a cell-phone that may or may not still exist. Apart from attending mass meetings and marches, most of the branch level membership are seldom involved in other aspects of the SECC beyond their own branch structure. A continuing source of frustration for the leadership is the lack of communication not only with the Careers Centre office, but also between the branches themselves (SECC/APF, 3rd Annual General Meeting, 6 March 2004 'SECC Overall Struggle').

APF and Keep Left activist Claire Cerruti (2002:45) has called the SECC a 'mini-mass movement'. Her description sums up one of the fundamental problems of analysing the SECC: its size. Given the informality of the SECC's membership structures (reflected in the SECC Constitution, n.d [c.2004]) one must rely on impressions to try to gauge its size. Trevor Ngwane's estimate that there are about 7000 active SECC members (2003:47) seems somewhat optimistic. One possible way of gauging size is to look at attendance at recent Annual General Meetings. Peter Alexander's estimate for 2003 was around 110 present on the first day and 80 on the second day (Alexander,2003:9). Similar numbers were evident in 2004. The problem with these figures is that there is considerable overlap in membership between the SECC and the APF (particularly among the leadership). Nor indeed can we reliably judge the SECC's size on such 'events' as the march on Sandton (somewhere between 20 000 and 25 000 demonstrators), which was a broad-based action comprising a range of new social movements as well as sympathisers and, in all likelihood, people who joined the march out of curiosity. SECC members themselves admit that some branches are stronger than others, with some having meetings of between 50 and 100 members and associates, while others have often less than ten members. Assuming that the Organiser's Report presented to the recent 2004 AGM is accurate,

³. This loose structure is embodied in the SECC Constitution. See: 'Constitution of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee', (n.d., circa 2004)

which suggests that there are about 32 branches spread across Soweto, the best case scenario for 'membership' might be between 1600 and 3200 members. If half the branches are inactive or have a handful of members, the estimate should drop to about 1000 active members. Any understanding of the SECC must recognise that involvement in the organisation fluctuates according to the level of campaigning, which from the evidence seems to suggest waxing and waning cycles of protest.

Apart from the SECC leadership and the illegal re-connectors who are mostly young men, there are few youth active at the branch level. In the post 1994 city, mobility and contested identities have become a resource for young people. Loxion culture, Kwaito music, and 'street-smart' are far more valuable, and offer far more leverage, for youth than perhaps old-fashioned notions of mass politics. While many youth still live in Soweto, and while there continues to exist a mythology of Soweto in youth culture, the aspirations and identity of much of Soweto youth is driven increasingly from Sandton and Rosebank, where the popular Y-FM is located, and where most of youth culture fashion emerges. In short, many Soweto youth seem 'apolitical' or 'depoliticised':

...[T]he youth of today is politically ignorant. You know, they like drugs, they like nice times. They are not politically conscious, because they believe the struggle is over. Everything is fine, we have democracy (Interview with SECC activist).

Even for those youth who are more politically conscious, the bread and butter issues of the branch level members, such as evictions and electricity cut-offs do not capture the imagination, as do more personal aspirations like mobility. The majority of SECC members are middle aged to elderly women. Yet this is seldom reflected in the profile of the leadership elected. These old ladies certainly chair some of the branches, but apart from the officer for the SECC Veterans the profile of the SECC leadership does not reflect the overwhelming majority of older women in its ranks. The old ladies, the 'grannies', are certainly taken seriously by the organisation, which conducts all its meetings in vernacular languages. But there remains an element of male domination in the SECC, something that mirrors the paradox of gender in the new South Africa: patriarchy in the land of official non-sexist non-racial democracy.

One place where the SECC does come together as a coherent movement is in the mass demonstrations outside council offices in downtown Johannesburg. This is the public profile of the SECC; the highly evocative image of several hundred pensioner-aged women, dressed in full SECC regalia, brandishing umbrella's and whistles, marching through the streets of down-town Johannesburg. It is in this moment of the march, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the SECC is the SECC. For a few fleeting moments there is a unity in the crowd. The symbolic value of closing the street for half the day is not insignificant in forging group cohesion and identity within the SECC, if not presenting an immediate threat to those in power. SECC operates within a network of associate organisations (Keep Left, Landless Peoples' Movement, etc) under the coordinating banner of the APF (Ngwane, 2004). Other grassroots groups openly align themselves with SECC, like the Tembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC) and the Small Farms Water Crisis Committee, who regard themselves as partners. They have largely emerged in response to the same concerns: evictions, service delivery and cut-offs (Interview with TCC activist, 2004), with no official membership structure, and wield no power yet try to listen to and fight for their community: 'We deal with all sorts of problems, from domestic, to crime, to education'(Interview with TCC activist, 2004). The TCC is but one, localised, example of

groups that stretch from Cape Town to Nelspruit fighting cost recovery programmes, advocating affordable utilities and demanding state recognition of poor communities that find themselves loosely 'aligned' to the SECC, many of them through the 'network umbrella' of the APF. This networking is not simply confined within South Africa but is also linked to the anti-globalisation resistance community. This has enabled the SECC, which although small and poor, has nevertheless received global coverage through its leaders' participation in a range of international forums.

5.2 Movement Activity: Mobilization and Contestation

In 2002, the SECC chose to boycott the debt moratorium process; some maintain the SECC was excluded. SANCO criticised the SECC for this decision.

No movement can be in an endgame all the time. Communities will do what needs to be done in terms of their lives improving, not for some ideological end (Donovan Williams, quoted in the Mail and Guardian, 2003).

The SECC retorted that the ANC and its allies such as SANCO have 'used the levers of state to pry what they see as *their* grassroots base from interlocutors' (Ngwane, quoted in the *Mail and Guardian*, 2003). Yet within the leadership there is acknowledgement that the decision not to be a part of the process was an unfortunate one. Although Donovan Williams' remarks may seem slightly incongruous, even disingenuous, in the light of a long South African civics movement tradition of activism for an ideological end, viz. the end of apartheid, it is also true that civic movements – in South Africa and elsewhere – have frequently been prepared to make pragmatic, short-term compromises to meet immediate needs, even when holding out for long term goals. Boycotting the debt moratorium process can certainly be seen as a tactical mistake for the SECC, even in the light of its consistent politics of contestation with the government.

What cannot be denied is that the SECC has been consistently outspoken in its critique of government policies, employing a number of contestational strategies, as its brief history recounted above illustrates.. Although 'any [movement] is constructed through political action' (Laclau, 2003:30), the strategic choices suggest much about the nature of a movement. Mobilisation and contestation take a range of shapes and forms that have at times helped to define the SECC, both in its own terms as an organisation and as part of a long South African tradition of resistance.

Demonstrations, marches, protest and other forms of mainly non-violent civil disobedience have long been a feature in the South African political landscape of struggle. From the beginning of the 20th Century, peaking during the 1950s and the period from 1979 to 1990, indeed running up to 1994, township organisations have mobilised large numbers not only to meet immediate needs but also to end apartheid (Bundy, 2000). These movements have, like the SECC, worked in broad mass-based alliances, e.g. the UDF (Seekings, 2000), together with small progressive support organisations that helped train activists and provide political education. Aligned often to the labour movement and broadly associated with the national liberation goals of the ANC, this combination of long term goals and short-term gains strove to achieve both political democracy and human development. The SECC's mobilization and contestational politics must be seen in this context as the continuation of the struggle - for human development and, for many of its members, for a broader notion of economic democracy – into a present where many former activists see the post-1994 dispensation as one of failure to deliver on earlier

promises and frustration at the demobilization of the 'civics' and the apparent disempowerment of civil society.

Although the SECC and its allies might be seen as part of a long tradition of mobilization in South Africa, like any social movement organisation seeking to be effective, it has adapted itself not only to the issues of the time, but also evolved tactics appropriate and particular to its main area of contestation. This is most evident in a form of contestation consistently pursued throughout the period under discussion (2000-2004): illegal reconnections. The high number of reconnections has enabled the mobilization of support. Strict professionalism and integrity in this respect is maintained because part of the performance of this work, the theatre or spectacle of the re-connection, is about extending the solidarity and support of the SECC. As one connector (interviewed 2004) said, 'you learn not to do it in the dark ... everybody must see who was there ... don't hide yourself'. Such civil disobedience, seen by the state as criminality, is part of the SECC's repertoire of contention, and does much to maintain SECC's public profile of community service and dissent: 'We turned what was a criminal deed from the point of view of Eskom, into an act of defiance'(Ngwane, 2003:47).

However, in areas where knowledge of the SECC is limited, where the sense of community is weak, or where (like Orlando West Extension) people are slightly wealthier and more able to pay for services, the re-connectors have often found hostility. Some fear 'trouble' with the authorities and ESKOM, or the inconvenience of temporary loss of power during re-connections. In such circumstances there is less likelihood of establishing a grass roots based movement. As one re-connector remarked, 'they put themselves high, because they pay. They think you will make a problem for him ... but if you do it right, he will realise that we are there to help, not to destroy'(interview with SECC re-connector, 2004).

Of course these offer no automatic guarantee of success, however one might choose to measure success. As noted at the March 2004 AGM, failures, weaknesses and perceived threats revolve around sustaining activism and keeping branches committed to the goals of the SECC. Members, it seems:

become involved in various activities but fail to report back to the executive and the forum. Activities are therefore not used to allow the organization to grow but [as an] individual thing. The organization also needs to develop a mechanism of dealing with the problems from the structures. (SECC/APF AGM, 6 March 2004, 'Chairperson's Report).

But this might suggest that the SECC leadership have less power to speak on behalf of their constituency than is acknowledged. The semi-autonomy of the branches may weaken the movement's ability to coordinate and maintain a sense of accountability, but it may also reflect the reality of how people in communities construct and contest identity. In this regard, the recent rumour that some of the re-connectors have been charging money to perform re-connections is not insignificant. While publically claimed as a political action, in the context of economic marginalisation and high unemployment many of the re-connectors regard their work as a job, and an access to resources. The report hints at this division between the 'political' leadership and its 'de-politicised' branches, a tension highlighted by the SECCs concern that many of its supporters remain politically loyal to the ANC.

It is therefore interesting to consider that the SECC has been systematically vilified by the ANC. At the peak in the 2000-2001 cycle of cut-offs and illegal reconnections, then Minister of Public Enterprise Jeff Radebe, while proposing a number of reforms to electricity service delivery - punishment of corrupt ESKOM officials, streamlined billing, an amnesty for those who reported illegal reconnections and a willingness to set aside 50% of residents' arrears - launched a stinging attack on the SECC as representing part of a 'criminal culture' with a radical anti-ANC agenda (Radebe, 2001). His voice echoed the views of many in the ANC who saw, and see, groups like the SECC as not only opponents of its public policies but also political challengers to the Tripartite Alliance's 'historic right' to represent the masses, particularly the working class. ANC and SACP discourse on the new social movements is rooted in denunciations of a supposed 'ultra left', whose position is unrealistic, 'undermining' the 'progressive' policies of the government (Nzimande, 2003; ANC Political Education Unit, 2002; Makhaye, 2002; Moleketi & Jele, 2002). Trevor Ngwane's status as a former ANC member in bad standing, a 'dreadlocked demagogue' (Kindra, 2003; Tankiso, 2003), reinforces this public hostility. The fury of such denunciations should surprise no one. Given that the SECC and its allies are drawing on a struggle tradition of which the Tripartite Alliance was such an integral part, and that the SECC is using many of the very mobilization strategies that were used, there must certainly be a nagging fear among the ANC leadership that what they may be seeing in microcosm is the emergence of a 'new UDF'. Such a fear can only be strengthened by the fact that elements within the SACP and COSATU have at times seemed to express more than a little sympathy for at least some of the aims of the SECC and its partners. The fear of a possible near-future split in the Tripartite Alliance, and the recognition that not all the results of GEAR have been beneficial to the poorest of the poor, may even have subtly influenced 2004 and post-2004 shifts in government thinking towards a more development-oriented economic and social policy. It remains to be seen how far this thinking will be translated into action.

Whatever the case at a national level, the SECC's mobilization of people and politics of contestation has certainly caught the attention of Government and the ANC at local level. Though the Government has denounced the movement as criminals, the ANC at the grassroots has perhaps paid greater heed to the lessons that need to be learnt. It has, at least semi-officially, noted the need to revive SANCO as a community-based lobbying organisation, revitalize ANC and SACP branches and encourage local councillors to be seen to be 'delivering' lest SECC, APF and its associates consider entering directly into the realm of contesting local council elections. One ANC commentator, though fiercely hostile to the SECC and Ngwane, presciently avoiding the 'criminal' and 'rent a mob' rhetoric of the ANC in government, noted that

history bears testimony to the fact that to spark a wave of disenchantment does not require big numbers (Tankiso, 2003).

5.3 Movement Identity: Culture and Ideology

The culture of the SECC, the symbolic expressive aspects of social behaviour (Wuthnow, 1987), those aspects of its 'action system' that generates collective identity (Melluci, 1995), comprises its beliefs, values, artefacts, symbols and rituals. Similarly, SECC ideology (in a Weberian rather than classically Marxist sense as the symbolic expression of political behaviour) is that of an SMO within overlapping layers of culture

(urban, African, township, new social movement, protest, and left intellectual cultures to name broad categories) that in turn creates its own multi-discursive, disjunctive culture within its membership. Within the SECC there appears to be a series of shifts at the level of political culture and ideology. Desai (2003a) argues that the 'poors'

have come to constitute the most relevant post-1994 social force from the point of view of challenging the prevailing political economy. The community movements have challenged the very boundaries of what for a short while after the demise of the apartheid state was seen exclusively as "politics".

What Desai tries to do here and elsewhere (eg Desai, 2002) is to link organisational ideology and grassroots political culture. What we have seen with the SECC is to a large degree a less conscious link: the unintentional disjuncture between a sophisticated critique of neo-liberal globalisation and cost recovery processes, which only occasionally coincides with a grassroots communal-family 'ideology' of survivalism and identities of daily material realities, linked at times to popular religiosity.

There is little evidence that SECC members at the branch level see themselves as part of a general resistance to neo-liberalism or the vanguard of a populist new left alternative to the ANC – most SECC members after all voted for the ANC in the 2004 General Election, as the SECC/APF leadership implicitly acknowledged by not calling explicitly for a stayaway. In contrast to the political and academic backgrounds of some of the founding members of the SECC, the majority of branch level members are probably less educated. They articulate their concerns as immediate and material, related to their daily lives rather than abstract ideas about privatisation and globalisation. In fact, one concern of the leadership is to educate the branches about these concepts, and to show how these ideas do impact upon peoples' daily lives (Interview with SECC organiser, March 2004).

They know something of that [privatisation and globalisation] at the APF. I am still a learner. I cannot tell somebody about it. I can say I am getting help for the level that I am at. Whatever I hear I will cram it ... it is my pleasure to see that nobody is living in darkness (interview with SECC branch member, April 2004).

In Soweto, electricity is important because 'life is hard without it' (a point made in numerous interviews, 2004). In the context of post Apartheid Soweto, and promises made by the Metro-mayor for affordable basic services for all, electricity is understood to be a right that is due to the grannies of Soweto, most of whom make up the membership of the SECC. In this respect, electricity is symbolic of what it means to have dispensed with Apartheid. For most SECC members at branch level, who are trying to survive and make 'Grannie's [monthly R1000.00] pension' keep eight people alive, the branches are the primary expression of discontent, and reflect the everydayness of post Apartheid Soweto. The SECC branch meetings take place in local school halls or community centres. These are places which people are generally familiar with, and may have some significance other than being just local spaces to gather. They are places to which people can and must walk, and the journey itself is often an important activity itself; members sometimes meet up along the way and discuss anything from electricity cut-offs to family matters. The fact that it affects 'us all' is the glue that binds members. The meetings affirm and re-iterate the daily lives of those that are involved and make up the branch, and act in some way as a support network for people in the local community.

Many of the branch members of the SECC are churchgoers, and there is often a resort to religious language in the meetings of the organisation. Certainly, the church occupies an important place for many of the branch members, and in the Chiawelo branch the meetings are held in a local church.

Most mornings I go to church. If I don't I feel something. After church I can meet my friend, maybe go to a meeting ... SECC is physical; church is spiritual. In prayer, they say pray and God will help those who do practical things (Interview with SECC branch member, April 2004).

Branch meetings usually begin with prayers and hymns and are interspersed with 'struggle' songs (sung with great gusto and familiarity). Many grassroots activists express their anger at their conditions as well as their sense of enthusiasm for the SECC in religious terms. Given the high level of popular religiosity in South Africa, the historic role played by religious activists in the anti-apartheid struggle, and the way in which religion has been a progressive mobilizing force from Latin America to the Philippines (cf. Berryman, 1984, 1987; Smith, 1991, 1996; De la Torre, 1986; Jones, 1989:201-214), none of this is surprising. However, unlike in the anti-apartheid period, protest rooted in popular religiosity has not created a new political 'theology of reconnection'⁴: the lived religious spirituality of ordinary SECC activists (and their counterparts in other SMOs) has yet to be given written symbolic expression. Many of the local churches in Soweto are selling salvation in the afterlife, and do not provide a context for political and community mobilisation, as they did in the 1980s.

There is a further popular element, as we have suggested in our examination of the SECC's mobilization and politics of contestation, of looking backwards to the anti-apartheid struggle, the tradition of UDF/ COSATU community mobilization before the ANC 'sold out' to the World Bank and IMF. 'Struggle' culture, including many of its cultural artefacts and symbols (including music, songs and the distinctive SECC T-shirt that uncannily and possibly deliberately resembles the SACP/COSATU T-shirt) has been re-appropriated. 'The ANC taught us how to protest' explains Ngwane about the sense of satisfaction that many of the old ladies took from cutting off the mayor's electricity in April 2002 (Interview with Ngwane, December 2003). This performance is a significant weapon in the repertoire of the SECC, having cut off many local councillors in the past (Interviews, 2004). Yet there is also a sense of frustration and despondency at times. 'We fought for this before', claimed one informant, 'why must we fight again?' (Interviews, March 2004). This reference to the struggles of the 1980s is a source of cultural continuity and an assertion of popular legitimacy, but may also backfire on the SECC by further alienating it from sympathetic elements within the Tripartite Alliance (Barchiesi, 2004: 35).

Although supposedly pursuing the 'dream of socialism' (SECC Constitution, 1.2 Vision, n.d.), the leadership's own ideology is complex. If anything it is multi-layered, self-consciously non-sectarian, welcoming members of all or no political parties into the fold: the underlying issues revolve around what Desai (2003b) calls 'the politics of the immediate', a politics of survival for the poor that unites the 'grannies of Soweto' with the illegal re-connecters and with Trevor Ngwane and his APF comrades. This is not

⁴. This may be because most 'progressive' theologians are still picking over the bones of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for their inspirations. Others may have moved onto more 'serious' stuff, and a few are now in government.

surprising, given the diversity of its membership. Such a politics of respect and recognition of diversity within communities expresses what Desai (2003b) has dubbed the essence of the South African 'new left'. As Flacks (2004:145) notes:

Ideologically committed activists frequently have taken leadership in single-issue causes and campaigns while, at least initially, seeing those causes as mere steps towards more ultimate ends, rather than ends in themselves.

The dominant daily SECC discourse seems more rooted in notions of economic rights in their clauses in the South African Constitution, claiming legitimacy in terms of their existence as the 'pensioners of Soweto' (Field notes, February 2004). There is no right to free electricity in the Bill of Rights (Roux and Vahle, 2002), though according to a study by the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) there may be some grounds to challenge electricity pricing under the constitution (Roux and Vahle, 2002). It remains unclear how successful the SECC would be in such a constitutional challenge. The AGM 2004 Chairperson's report, having savaged 'bourgeois politics' argued that, once SECC and other movements have built up a more solid political base in Soweto, a shift to participation in elections may occur. This would be a new direction for the SECC and the APF, and it could pose a great risk. Could it succeed in the face of a hegemonic ANC? With the networks forged by the leadership with other social movement organisations, such a party might offer an alternative to current political parties (McKinley, 2004; Harvey, 2004; Harvey 2002a). The unknown factor is how far the SECC could take its diverse and elusive constituency, and whether the many 'poors' of Soweto would in fact choose such an alternative.

6. CONCLUSION

The leadership of the SECC tends to understand their role as providing localised resistance to the ideology of 'cost recovery' and neo-liberal policies in South Africa. In this regard the SECC has been somewhat successful insofar as it has built a public profile of consistent critique of government policy, and has turned the electricity crisis into a political issue. This, despite its fairly small size, loose structure and disjuncture between its base and leadership. Such strategic resourcefulness can (sometimes at least) overcome institutional power. Drawing on a combination of leadership and sound organisation, rooted in deliberation among members, using resources to mobilize multiple constituencies, and based on strict accountability, Ganz (2004: 177) argues that:

[o]rganizations can compensate for lack of economic, political, or cultural resources with creative strategy, a function of the motivation, access to a diversity of salient information, and heuristic facility with which their leadership teams interact with their environment ... People can generate the power to resolve grievances not only if those with power decide to use it on their behalf, but also if they can develop the capacity to outthink and outlast opponents - a matter of leadership and organization.

Yet the SECC remains a diverse and heterogeneous organisation. Spread across over twenty branches across Soweto, and containing within it a broad set of ideological and cultural origins, it is unclear how the cleavages of age, gender and political identity will play themselves out within the organisation. Moreover, the relationship between the SECC and other organisations remains tentative. The relationship with the APF represents the solidification of a 'new left' political identity among the leadership level, but the

impact at the branch level, where issues are expressed far more in material immediacy, remains luke-warm. The SECC consistently berates government economic policies publically, but has so far been unable to mobilise support for contesting local elections. In the meantime, the SECC continues to exist in its most potent form at the branch level, organised around local campaigns of resistance and the everyday realities of illegality, church and electricity.

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INTERVIEWS

Many of these names are aliases. Dates and specific places of interviews have been deliberately obscured. All interviews occurred within the Johannesburg-Soweto area.

Anonymous SECC re-connector, 2004.

Anonymous SECC member, Orlando West Extension, 2004.

Anonymous SECC member, 2004.

Youth activist no. 1, SECC, 2004.

SECC activist no. 1, 2004.

SECC activist no. 2, 2004.

SECC activist no. 3, 2004.

SECC activist no. 4, 2004.

Tembelihle Crisis Committee activist no. 1, 2004.

Cerruti, Claire. Keep Left activist, 2004.

McKinley, Dale. Member APF executive, former SACP member, 2003.

Ngwane, Trevor. SECC founder, currently Organiser for APF, 2003.

In addition there were numerous un-recorded conversations with SECC, APF and TCC members attending meetings, rallies and demonstrations. We also gained insights into SECC through participant observation.

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTATION

We were most generously given copies of pamphlets, in-house newsletters, the SECC Constitution and a selection of SECC minutes of meetings, as well as similar documents of SECC associates and allies. Those we have used are recorded in the footnotes in our text. Our deepest thanks to all those who have helped and trusted us.