

Communities mobilise against privatisation

Interview with Virginia Setshedi of the SECC

Lucien van der Walt

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An old interview with Virginia Setshedi, at the time an activist in the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), a key affiliate of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). The APF, centred in Gauteng, had been launched earlier that year; as one of its two Media Officers, I was also editor of the *Anti-Privatisation Monitor*.

One of my dozens of tasks in that role.

In 2006 (by which time I was out of the APF and focused on other work, including writing *Black Flame*), the contradictions in the 2000s-era “new” movements started to explode.

In December that year, the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* squatters’ movement and the (Western Cape) Anti-Evictions Campaign protested at the Social Movements’ Indaba (SMI) summit at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The SMI was meant to be a coalition of movements like the APF, founded in 2002.

Protestors cited a lack of democracy and NGO manipulation and also protested the dismissal of Faizel Khan, Richard Pithouse, Richard Ballard and Raj Patel from the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) and/ or UKZN (the CCS being closely linked to the SMI) (also here). They were joined by students linked to Democratic Student Movement (DSM), now part of the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP).

Setshedi was among those who subsequently labelled the actions of Abahlali baseMjondolo as violent “*tsotsi*” (gangster/ thug) politics (V. Setshedi, 18 December 2006, “Report Glosses Over Tsotsi Politics,” *Mail and Guardian*). The Anti-Evictions Campaign described this as action as her “eternal shame,” and Abahlali denied the claims, providing raw footage of the protest that presented a very different picture: see here.

The SMI issue marked a major dividing line in the 2000s.

Can you tell us a bit about the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee?

The Soweto Electricity Crisis committee started out of structures in different locations in Soweto. All of those locations’ representatives decided to come together and make one committee, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. After people of Soweto suffered a lot of cut-offs by Eskom, especially during the winter, and elderly people died of cold, and therefore we decided to come up with this structure. We decided that it shouldn’t be linked to any political organisation, because people now seemingly have lost faith on political organisations.

We had problems like people having their electricity cut-off, receiving notices, and they were told to pay thousands of rands, and some of them were owing something like R35,000, and some of them R11,000... Sometimes Eskom would listen, it depends who you get. At the moment, some locations have taken the resolution, for example Diepkloof Concerned Residents have decided to boycott paying electricity. They are boycotting, but not necessarily all people are not paying, you know how people are. I think it can impact on Eskom, because last Monday we had a meeting with Morris Ramataba, he is the head manager of Diepkloof, he wanted to see the Diepkloof Concerned Residents. But he was telling us Eskom is prepared to still continue with the cut-offs if people are not prepared to pay. And if we don’t pay, and have your electricity connected illegally you will be facing criminal charges.

So if Eskom come into the township to cut off electricity, do they face resistance?

Yes, because he was told that his workers, their safety is not guaranteed in the location. Now what they do, they come with two cars. There is this car with Eskom employees, and the other car with hit squads, people with guns and all this stuff.

So, people are actually confused on what to do on the issue of electricity, but as the electricity crisis committee we are having meetings and workshops, we are trying to go deep educating ourselves on how to fight the problem of electricity. And now we have just realised that Eskom wants to introduce this new remote control system, where they will be able to cut your electricity system at anytime, any day but without going into the location.

How do people try to pay Eskom?

People will go and borrow that money, maybe from the money lenders, and then they go and pay that 2,000. Then next month they have to start paying the money lenders. And then they don't go back to pay for Eskom's current account. And then it comes again and cut off. That is the problem. And if you can get into arrears with Eskom, you just pay interest before you can pay the debt itself. People even complained about the metermen, because they sometimes don't come to read the meter, but you find a statement.

What is the scale of the cut-offs?

I think now it has decreased a little bit due to the threats, but in May/June I think 100 people could get cut in one week. You will find that in one street maybe only 2houses have not been cut off.

Would you say that people have a fighting spirit around the cut-offs?

Yes, they do, they do. It is only that they are not focused. Even in our committee that weformed, people are not well informed. There is this thing that we are from different political organisations,so that if the point someone raises jeopardises the position of their political party there is always a conflict. But we are trying by all means to be neutral.

What can the APF do to help the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee?

We are still trying to draw some of the committees from other locations, because not all of them are involved. But we are trying to draw them in and familiarise them with what we are dealing with. The APF can come in now when we are starting to organise rallies, we are thinking of having an office regarding the issue of electricity, where we are able to help people with their problems, represent them as communities.

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