

An Anarchist Perspective on the South African AIDS Question

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April 2001

The position that AIDS is a disease of poverty cannot be disputed. Like with everything in life, the capitalist class, using the wealth it has expropriated has a monopoly on unlimited access to condoms, medication and better knowledge of the disease.

President Thabo Mbeki, in taking the position that HIV does not cause AIDS, has turned what could have been a progressive debate into a death sentence for many in South Africa.

Although cholera, malaria, TB and many other diseases continue to be cited as the cause of death for many millions of poor people all over Africa, AIDS has compounded these problems. Arguments that the rates of infection and deaths as a result of HIV/AIDS are overestimated, that people are dying from poverty alone are just as misinformed. Whether AIDS is as big a killer as projected or whether it is one of many is hardly the point. People are dying of AIDS related illnesses and death rates. In 1999 AIDS related deaths are estimated at around 250 000 in South Africa. The majority of these deaths are amongst people between the ages of 16 and 45, a section of the population that has the lowest death rates under normal circumstances. To attempt to explain this away by citing other diseases of poverty like TB or cholera is irresponsible, to say the least. South Africa is presently facing a cholera epidemic in some areas and the causes, symptoms and death rates are fundamentally different. The epidemic has been identified for what it is and people dying of cholera are diagnosed and when they have access to treatment, treated for it, as are people with TB, malaria etc. These deaths are however small in comparison to the untreatable epidemic of AIDS and all you have to do is visit a hospital or rural clinic in South Africa to realise that the disease exists. It is important, to make a distinction between the micro-organisms that destroy peoples bodies and the governments and multinationals that line their pockets with money dripping in blood. A society that worships profit, where heads of state ignore frightening statistics because state coffers are clearly better put to use buying luxury cars has to be blamed for these deaths.

The current court case between the South African Government and the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association of SA (PMA) over the right to import generic drugs, is heralded by the world as a triumph for the poor living with AIDS. However, gallant displays of empathy in front of the international media on the part of the government barely begin to address the problem. Access to health care, particularly in the rural areas is still extremely poor. Although Multina-

tionals ownership of drug patents are nothing more than a crime against humanity, education campaigns, access to protection and access to health care are as scarce as the exorbitantly expensive drugs.

A hell of a lot more will have to be done to protect people from this disease. This will include the development of decent infrastructure, better wages and more jobs for health care workers and better living conditions for the people in the here and now, as drugs do not help if you are hungry. This is not being done and as is typical of government, the best way to cover-up social injustice is to either pretend it doesn't exist or if that fails put on an extravaganza to create the impression of concern. If South Africa does receive the generic drugs it is unlikely given the current distribution system that it will have much of an impact at all. The TAC's successful tactics of not relying on Government or big business to solve our problems and instead relying on our own direct actions by importing generic aids drugs and distributing them directly shows the way forward.

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Retrieved on 5th August 2021 from zabalaza.net
Published in *Zabalaza* #1.

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