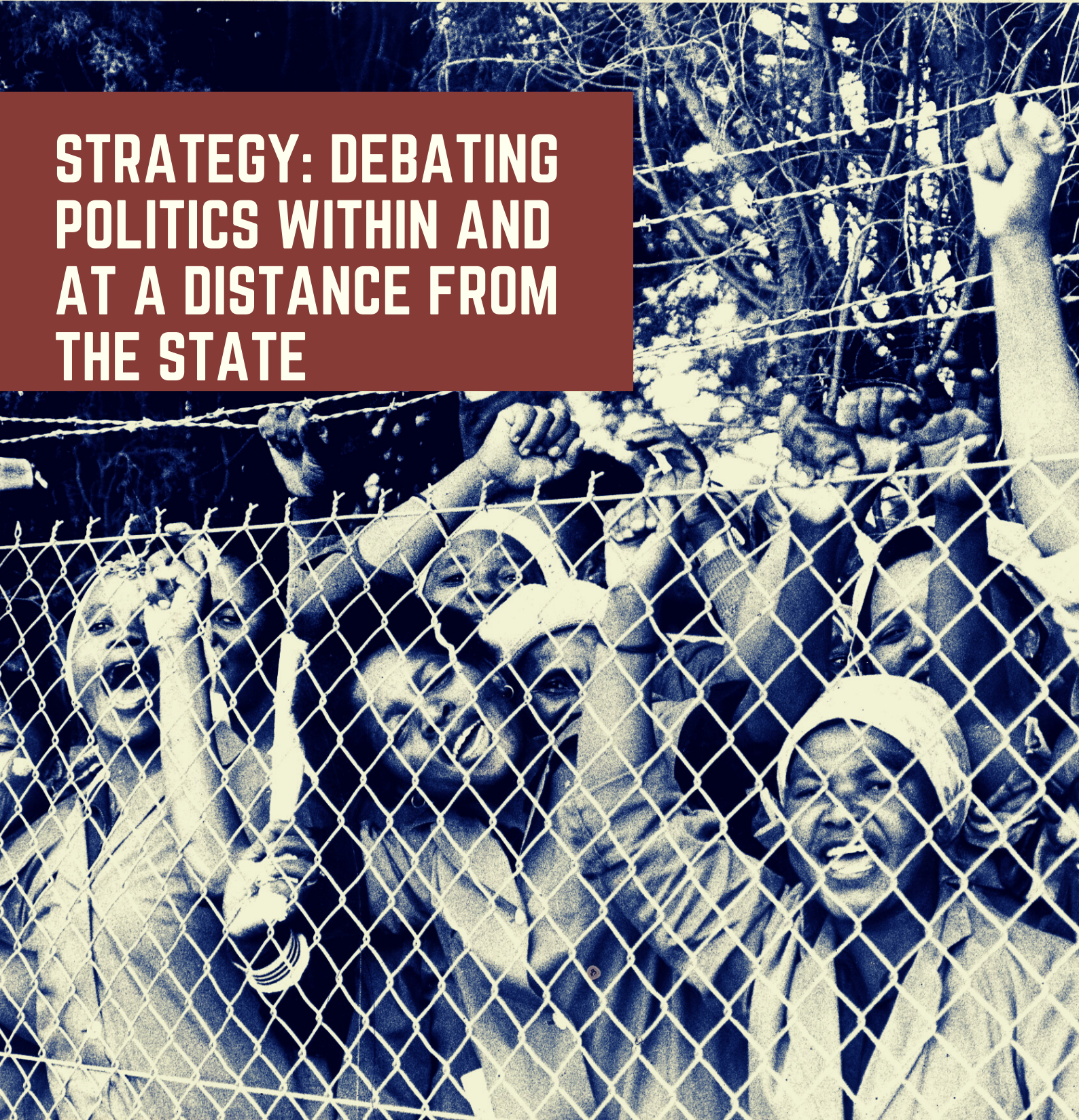


STRATEGY: DEBATING POLITICS WITHIN AND AT A DISTANCE FROM THE STATE



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EDITORS: John Reynolds & Lucien van der Walt

CONTRIBUTORS: Laura Alfes, Colm Allan, David Fryer, Mazibuko Jara, Gilton Klerck, Ayanda Kota, Warren McGregor, Lalitha Naidoo, Kanyiso Ntikinca, John Reynolds, Nicole Ulrich & Lucien van der Walt.



NEIL AGGETT LABOUR
STUDIES UNIT

NALSU

5.2 Organising to secure municipal service delivery

Ayanda Kota

One of the most striking features of the post-apartheid landscape has been the proliferation of local protests, often dubbed “service delivery” protests by the media. There were around 15,000 protests defined as “unrest” by the police from 1997-2013. This is not what was expected by policy-makers who designed post-apartheid local government to be democratic and pro-poor. Between the rhetoric of inclusion, participation and service delivery, and the reality, however, there is a very large gap.

This where social movements like the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM), within which I am active, come into the picture. We, political actors who refuse to succumb to the corrupting forces of party politics, are organising ourselves in our communities precisely because we have lost all trust in the state. That does not mean we support the private capitalists; we take a black working class position of fighting for a new democracy, from below.

Between rhetoric and reality

While funding is available to municipalities, including for Free Basic Services (FBS), there are ongoing problems of corruption. These are closely linked to the extensive subcontracting of services, which enables a whole service of “tenderpreneurs” to emerge, based on inflated prices, nepotistic connections and low quality delivery. At the same time, there has been a systematic increase in metering for water and electricity, and rising service charges. For example, power prices in South Africa have climbed by more than double the inflation rate over the past decade at ESKOM, and many municipalities add on extra for profit.¹ Money for Expanded Public Works Programmes (EPWPs) is used to create a large, low wage precarious workforce, supposedly to deliver services. Smaller municipalities face rising debt, driving a need to collect money from community members. In addition, there are serious problems in municipal capacity, both with unfilled posts in key departments, and political appointments based on party loyalty rather than competence.

Knitting this together are political parties, which provide key means of accessing tenders, allocating EPWP jobs, key posts in the state, and links between private business and the state. Despite the high expectations of 1994, parties have increasingly been retooled into engines of power, with dissent closed down and activists pushing for a different road side-lined. For example, Trevor Ngwane was pushed out of the ANC, Dale McKinley, Mazibuko Jara and others from the SACP, and many activists have left both the PAC and AZAPO. Fundamentally, the reason is the erosion of democracy in these organisations and that these organisations have failed to reimagine politics; rather they have practised politics as the pursuit of power and tenders. As Frantz Fanon noted:²

After independence the party sinks into a profound lethargy. The only time the militants are called upon to rally is during so-called popular festivals, international conferences, and Independence Day celebrations. The local cadres of the party are appointed to administrative jobs, the party itself becomes an administration and the militants fall back into line and adopt the hollow title of citizen. Now that they have fulfilled their historic mission of bringing

¹ Burkhardt, P., M. Cohen, and A. Sguazzin. 1 July 2019. “These Charts Show how Much Trouble Eskom is in: South Africa’s planned \$16-billion bailout for the ailing utility won’t come close to what’s needed.” *Bloomberg*.

² Fanon, F. [1963] 1991. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld. p. 170.

the bourgeoisie to power, they are firmly asked to withdraw so that the bourgeoisie can quietly fulfil its own mission.... The party becomes a tool for individual advancement.

Writing in the 1950s and 1960s, Fanon warned, with prescient clarity, of the corrupting forces affecting the formation of political parties in postcolonial states. The parties become self-serving and elitist, whether they started out as liberation movements or not. Such parties find a way of corrupting those who stay and of pushing out the incorruptible. They become magnets for opportunists, working not so much for the consolidation of a democratic order, but as points of extraction for the greedy.

From parties to social movements

In a recent book, Gillian Hart argued that Fanon's understandings of nationalism and Gramsci's work can help us understand ongoing municipal protests. She argued that "local councillors are being transformed into a petty bourgeoisie on the road to class power in the context of intensifying struggles over resources flowing into local government."³

As numerous South African scholars have highlighted, the formation of many social movements in our country over the last 20 years is a reflection of the failure of political parties and a failure of our political system. This process began in the 1990s and, despite reverses, continues.⁴ Social movements emerge from the endless protests of the working class and poor, who remain trapped in the township system and in pools of poverty and unemployment. Municipalities reinforce this situation – a look at any town will show that in the midst of fiscal crisis and gross mismanagement, the municipality treats the townships worst.

Antonio Gramsci was correct in pointing out that all of us have the ability to be leaders. For him, organic intellectuals were those people who were in the majority and had direct experiences with the economic structure, as cogs within capitalist production. It was through these organic intellectuals that organic ideologies could take shape that would challenge the hegemonic relations within society. Like many Marxists of his time, Gramsci situated his organic intellectuals within the working class, on the factory floor, but Fanon implored Marxists to "stretch" this understanding. In South Africa, even with its history of political organising through unions and labour, we must acknowledge that the people with some of the greatest suffering and experience and knowledge of the economic structure, are the unemployed.

The problem is political, not natural

The wave of struggles waged by what we call social movements, organisations from the working class, the unemployed, and the landless, have made important contributions in shattering faith in parliamentarianism. Slogans like "no land no vote" take hold and show the potential of an organic ideology, but, more importantly, they have brought socialism back into the agenda.

I concur with Mazibuko Jara that at times social movements have helped to dramatize the situation but have not been able to push enough for fundamental alteration to the political or economic system, or to push for policies that could benefit the working class and black people. These

³ Hart, G. 2013. *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, populism, hegemony*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. p. 149.

⁴ McKinley, D. 2017. *South Africa's Corporatised Liberation: A critical analysis of the ANC in power*. Auckland Park Johannesburg: Jacana.

shortcomings are most evident in the crises faced within our municipalities, and, as I will argue, these municipal crises have emerged from problems with our political system and parties.

I spoke of political parties earlier, who move from liberation to accumulation. Our municipalities become a terrain of this as well; they reflect our politics and political parties. In Nelson Mandela Metro, for example, there are shocking reports of corrupt tenders, some even involving organised crime, which leads easily to the use of murder as a means to gain advantage.

It is often assumed that our problems are fundamentally technical, and that technocratic solutions will save us. This is wrong. Our problems are fundamentally political. The ANC represents a state-based elite, what Fanon called the national bourgeoisie. The Ramaphosa faction became rich by making deals with white capital. The Zuma faction, which is now led by Magasuhle, became rich by looting the state. There is no faction in the ANC that represents the people.

In fact, there is no party in parliament that represents the people. Do not make a mistake of thinking since I criticise the ANC that I champion another party. The DA is no angel, calling for evictions, promoting xenophobia, pushing capitalism and prioritising the suburbs. The EFF was founded by a leading tenderpreneur, after he fell out with an even more established tenderpreneur, then-President Zuma. Besides being willing to form coalitions with both the ANC and the DA – the very parties it says it will remove – and so becoming co-responsible for their actions, recent reports make it clear that its leaders are involved with smugglers, VBS and DA tender scams.

Makana municipality

Our municipality, Makana, gets a grant of R30m quarterly as an equitable share of national government revenue. Much of this goes to service debt, some of it the product of ESKOM profit-seeking and some from service tenderpreneurs who inflate prices. Given widespread poverty and unemployment – unemployment stands at a staggering 70% – and municipal maladministration, it gets about R5.8m. Then R15m must pay salaries. Hence, there is always a deficit of R9.2m even with the equitable share grant.

Our municipal infrastructure has collapsed. But even this is not a simple matter of there being no money. When we look at the Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG), the third main source of the municipality's funds, we find that 79% of this money, meant to repair our infrastructure, is returned to Treasury, unused. This is despite the dilapidated infrastructure. We are left without water for weeks, with dry taps in scorching temperatures.

While we are feeling the impacts of climate change – South Africa is experiencing one of the harshest droughts in our time – we should not mix the natural disaster with the social disaster. The major water shortages that made news countrywide for our town were linked to falling dam levels, but, equally, to a disastrous lack of basic management and forward planning. The town is connected to river systems beyond the dams, and is on a massive aquifer. When the charity *Gift of the Givers* drilled dozens of boreholes, the municipality failed to connect these to the grid.

Therefore, we must not just look at the skies, as much of the shortage lies in the hands of corrupt and incompetent state officials. Our neo-colonial states support local elites and leave the poor to fend for themselves. If we have water, at times it is contaminated because the municipality does not have money to buy chemicals for purification. Recently they bought chlorine, of the type which is used for swimming pools, to purify our water. This is expensive and inappropriate. Corruption is a cancer that is savaging our communities and it is beyond treatment. In Enkanini informal settlement people are sharing water with livestock.

The problem that this municipality is bankrupt is due to chronic ineptitude and theft. We have damning reports on the state of the Makana municipality. At the national level, a recent, devastating Auditor General's Report illustrates corruption and incompetence on a massive scale. It notes that 74% of municipalities have failed audits, and they are unable to account for more than R25bn – this is an estimated figure and could double any time. The political class that is attached the municipalities views them as piggy banks for their pockets, with little concerns for the masses. All the talk about Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and so on remains empty, as long as there is no change in our lives as the working class of this city and of this land.

An alternative: democracy from below

Politicians and officials in municipalities across the country seem to put their party and their careers and their class interests above the community. They pledge their loyalty to their party and have immersed themselves in party factional battles for their careers and interests.

The only real solution to our crisis is to build revolutionary democracy from below. This parliamentary democracy is not for us, it is only democracy in name only. As the Unemployed People's Movement, we have engaged in struggles on a range of fronts, to build for change, including:

- Blocking anti-immigrant attacks.
- Mobilising around service issues in the township, including protests.
- Providing some para-legal services.
- Working with other community groups, including in campaigns to place Makana under provincial administration.

Maybe we need to leave and abandon one way of doing politics, which is elections and the state. We need to realise that there are many ways of doing politics and a range of political traditions. We must work out new concepts. Life is no easy matter, it is a struggle! Only through struggle can we win decent lives, with dignity and real democracy.