

ORGANISING WORKING CLASS COMMUNITIES UNDER PANDEMIC & LOCKDOWN

Two mile queues for food parcels. Corruption and patronage in their distribution. Shops being looted. Schools vandalised and burned. Collapsing household income. Confusion over accessing social grants. Tens-of-thousands of arrests and fines. Harassment, beatings, and even killings at the hands of state forces. The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has heaped new misery on long-suffering working class communities.

Before the pandemic, community protests over inadequate housing and service-delivery exploded regularly. So much so that South Africa was named the protest capital of the world. But the decline of the Cosatu trade union federation and collapse of the ANC-aligned South African National Civic Organisation left protests isolated and un-coordinated. This limited what could be achieved and made it easier for capitalist politicians to ignore communities' demands. Nevertheless, in the vacuum, independent civics, local crisis committees and other community forums have mushroomed. Many have disappeared as quickly as they popped-up. Others have been more stable and long-lasting like the shack-dwellers movement Abahlali baseMjondolo.

But with important exceptions, most communities lack mass, democratic and unifying community organisations. As a result, under the State of Disaster, the vacuum is being filled by the repression of the capitalist state, handouts from NGOs, charities and churches (and even criminal gangs!) and the party-patronage networks of corrupt local councillors. **The working class and poor are not the masters of their own communities.**

The economic chaos caused by Covid-19 and the lockdown has changed everything. The hunger and poverty which was barely tolerable yesterday is now a full-blown social crisis, the slide into barbarism merely slowed by the government's inadequate 'emergency' measures. The rapid changes in daily life and the realisation that the "new normal" is vastly worse than the "old normal" is having a profound effect on the outlook of millions of workers and poor people. This means that as much as the pandemic is a disaster for communities, it is also an **opportunity** to push forward **independent working class community organisation**.

EPWP Workers

Many working class and left organisations have put forward useful programmes of demands that communities can take-up and use. But the key question is how, and by whom, these programmes will be implemented. The Marxist Workers Party is working with our members, supporters and allies in the Gauteng EPWP Workers Forum to try and put in place the basic outline of community organisations in the different townships and informal settlements where workers live.

The Forum has now written to the Gauteng Provincial Government and its departments of Health and Education to propose that the EPWP programme is re-purposed and re-tooled to assist with community organisation during the pandemic. It is a terrible waste of human resources to have this entire workforce sitting idle. Instead, they could be put to work deep-cleaning schools and other workplaces before they re-open, assisting in contact tracing, and playing a stewarding role to ensure social-distancing is followed in the waiting rooms of clinics and hospitals, and outside schools and food parcel distribution points.

The Forum is proposing that the Gauteng Provincial Government provides EPWP workers with the necessary health training to enable them to work safely under pandemic conditions, including providing them with adequate personal protective equipment. In addition, the Forum proposes that the Solidarity Fund, or other emergency funding sources, be used to reinstate their withheld April payments and finally bring EPWP workers' wages up to at least the level of the R3,500 per month minimum wage. Those EPWP workers whom it would not be safe to mobilise because of their age or underlying health conditions should also be entitled to this increased wage whilst remaining at home. The demand for permanent jobs and a living wage of R12,500 remains in full effect.

However, given the brutal and cruel treatment that EPWP workers have suffered at the hands of the ANC-run Gauteng Department of Infrastructure Development, workers are not waiting for official 'permission'.

Community Organising

The police and soldiers on the streets have little legitimacy. They are not elected and they are not accountable to communities. Communities are well aware of the dangers of Covid-19. But for most it is a difficulty – for many an impossibility!

– to observe social-distancing in over-crowded dwellings and communities. It is also impossible to be locked down without food or money to buy it.

Tension is fuelled when this **practical** problem is interpreted by state forces as 'flaunting' the regulations, or as indicating a reckless 'lack of concern' about the virus. Confrontation is inevitable when state forces respond with harassment and the use of force. **The troops should be withdrawn from communities.** They could be put to far better use elsewhere. For example building emergency field hospitals. Corrupt councillors further undermine community cohesion and solidarity by trying to control the distribution of emergency relief like war lords in failed states.

In place of this mess, mass **democratic** community structures need to be built. The working class needs to take control of the battle against Covid-19. The tradition of community self-organisation remains alive and relatively strong. It is this which communities should rely upon.

We have proposed that EPWP Forum activists work to establish 'Covid brigades' in their communities. Each and every street and bloc should elect a representative to form part of the brigade. Police and soldiers **impose** authority. But the Covid brigades should take **workplace shop stewards** as their model – elected and recallable, merely the 'first among equals', and accounting directly to those they represent.

The first task of the brigade must be to turn a key element in the existing situation on its head. Currently the government **tells** communities what they are willing to make available and who they will allow to receive it. This causes conflict over limited resources, e.g. fights over food parcels. This approach must be rejected. Instead, brigade representatives must conduct surveys to determine the **needs** of every household. For example, one street-survey may find: (1) three households only have food left for two days and are in urgent need of a food parcel each, (2) one household has a pensioner who needs help to collect medicine, (3) six households have essential workers who do not have facemasks in order to travel safely, (4) ten households need to claim the new SASSA grant or UIF but do not know how etc. etc.

By collating the street-by-street and bloc-by-bloc surveys the brigades can put together a full and detailed **'needs budget'** for the whole community. These could then be taken to local councillors with a demand that they go and rapidly find the necessary resources. Their distribution will then also be under the supervision of the brigade. Disciplined community protests that observe social-distancing, marshalled by the brigade, can be organised if demands are not met within a clear time-frame.

Whilst only a start, such steps could begin to put power back in the hands of working class communities. Covid brigades should link-up with shop stewards and trade unions in local workplaces, especially in supermarkets and large-pharmacies, and with other retail and delivery workers. Trade union members who have been laid-off or temporarily furloughed should be invited to form part of the Covid brigade to strengthen the link between the workplaces and working class communities.

"Never Again!"

The ANC government's emergency measures have been slow to arrive, inadequate, and blighted by corruption and state brutality. But poor communities will not simply accept that after the pandemic social grants will be cut, food parcels stopped, the homeless thrown back out onto the streets and the same over-crowded slum-like conditions allowed to re-emerge.

Building community organisation now will be a foundation from which to launch a mass campaign demanding that (1) all poverty-alleviation measures are deepened and made permanent, and (2) that a mass housebuilding, electricity, water, sanitation, road and public transport infrastructure programme is launched, learning all the lessons of the Covid-19 crisis. The demand that "Never Again!" can communities be left vulnerable to pandemics and starvation can gain a powerful echo.

Even now, working class activists should be looking ahead to the 2021 local elections. The capitalist politicians and capitalist political parties that neglected communities for so long created the conditions for disease and starvation. They cannot be allowed to stand without accounting for this. A serious working class challenge is needed. Exactly, what form this takes will depend on how the pandemic and economic disaster it has created unfolds in the coming weeks and months. Most crucially, it will depend on the success we have in building genuine community organisations today that are capable of making a difference in the lives of working class and poor communities.