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Working Class Livelihoods

Struggle against Each Other, or Revolt against the System?

Bongani Maponyane

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Rising inflation means increases in food and petrol prices. Inflation is a global problem, driven partly by conglomerates maximising their profits at the expense of ordinary people. The state plays its role, continually raising prices for services.

The pressure of capitalism has impacted on our lives. It has caused clashes within the working classes, resulting in discrimination and prejudice. Ruling class elites – the political and economic elite – benefit from these struggles between people who compete for scraps from their tables.

Khutsong, known as a community active in struggle, is marked by many hardships. Many are linked to inadequate public and taxi transportation systems.

Rising water and electricity tariffs were imposed on the community without any consultation. As a result, the taxi industry has hiked prices. Many people began using other means of transport, like hopping into friends', or other people's cars.

The local taxi association has tried to prevent commuters from doing so. Taxi drivers are stopping car owners found carrying passengers picked up along the road. Drivers say that

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they are unable to keep up with instalments, vehicle services and monthly debt. According to a driver who asked to remain anonymous, if commuters start using private cars “[t]his will cause big financial problems for us. So we are not fighting. We just want things back to normal.”

But this leads to much misunderstanding and conflict; it has been going on for months. And community members are, not surprisingly, unhappy about this situation.

This has all been to the benefit of a few capitalists who own the taxis and employ the drivers. The drivers are also workers, but are being pushed into conflict with other working class people.

Due to the increases in costs, people are also increasingly buying food in the township (Khutsong) rather than in the “town” (Carltonville). But here other conflicts of interest within the community emerge.

Khutsong is a relatively diverse community which includes Pakistanis, Ethiopians and Indians. Many of these people run small trading businesses, usually “spaza” shops (small informal shops). These compete with shops run by black South African locals, many of which have closed down. This creates grounds for more conflict and misunderstanding.

For the average person trying to look after themselves and their family – on a low wage if they are lucky enough to even be employed – all these rising costs have a very negative impact. Nor can those who have retired make ends meet, due to the little they have and receive at retirement.

People cannot live like this – people cannot sustain themselves due to these situations. The ruling class in the state and capitalism are living well. So where is the equality in all of this?

These economic and political crises that have a negative impact on the majority of society are called many things by the bosses: the “meltdown”, the “credit crunch”, the “recession” – all complicated terms that people don’t understand.

We, the masses, need to educate ourselves politically to emancipate ourselves from mental entrapments – including conflicts that divide us that benefit the bosses and politicians. Not forgetting our “lumpenproletariat” brothers and sisters suffering on the streets who we must bring into the struggle for a better world.

The massive Anti North-West Campaign (the Khutsong struggle around provincial demarcation) a few years ago showed the true nature of the community – a community of solidarity, resistance and rebellion.

We need this heroic character to shine again in our fight against the bosses in the state and in business. All of their wealth, whether through exploitation at work or through taxation and tariffs, is generated by the working class, both employed and unemployed.

With hierarchical systems in place that loot the working class and poor, but which exempts big corporations from tax, and politicians from accountability, there can never be justice – and therefore no peace.

Much of our lives is still dictated by the legacy of apartheid, but perpetuated by greedy state officials and big business owners.

Will the community rise against this challenge, or rest like the name it carries?¹

¹ “Khutsong” means “place of peace” in Setswana