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Radical South African magazine relaunched

Lucien van der Walt

9 May 2001

JOHANNESBURG — The radical magazine, *Debate: voices from the South African left*, was recently relaunched at the Workers' Library and Museum in Newtown, Johannesburg. The excellent turnout on March 23 demonstrated the potential for the revived journal to build links between community and worker activists and radical intellectuals.

As Dinga Sikwebu, a radical unionist from the National Union of Metalworkers and keynote speaker at the launch, pointed out, *Debate* is part of a long history of radical media in South Africa that has sought to unite struggles, promote discussion and analysis, and strengthen progressive social movements.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the struggle centred on destroying the apartheid system; today, neo-liberalism confronts the working class on all fronts.

Debate first appeared in 1996 as a non-sectarian and socialist-orientated platform for a diverse left that was still grappling with the implications of South Africa's democratic transition, and with

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the class character of the new African National Congress (ANC) government.

The first series of *Debate*, however, only ran for four issues, the last of which appeared in 1998. Financial problems, poor distribution, and internal divisions contributed to its demise.

In late 2000, a new editorial collective was constituted and after months of hard work, issue #5 has hit the streets.

Unlike the first series of *Debate*, which contained mainly lengthy articles in a bound, academic-style journal format, the new *Debate* has a fresher, livelier and more accessible style: 48 pages of news reports, notices of coming events, punchy analytical articles from a range of left perspectives and revolutionary culture in the form of poetry and photo-essays.

A hefty donation from British anarchist rockers Chumbawumba helped put *Debate* back on its feet. The anarchist band is well-known for albums like *English Rebel Songs* (covers of revolutionary songs and anthems from the 1381 English peasant rising, the Chartists, the Luddites, strikers and rebel soldiers in World War I), *Pictures of Starving Children* (which exposed the hypocrisy of Band Aid-style charity) and *Never Mind the Ballots* (whoever you vote for, capitalism gets in).

Articles in *Debate* issue #5 discuss the challenges facing the South African working class — from evictions, through water privatisation and mass electricity cut-offs, to the changing role of the trade unions — and examines working-class responses to the neo-liberalism of the ANC government.

Other articles consider the relevance of Frantz Fanon to the South African transition, discuss the recent assassination of Carlos Cardoso, a radical Mozambican journalist, and expose the real legacy of the late Harry Oppenheimer, the mining and manufacturing magnate whose dynasty still shapes the “new” South Africa’s destiny.

And of course, there is a revolutionary culture section, with poems by Kelwyn Sole, and the popular narrator, “Righteous the

Common Man”. There is also a photo essay on the emerging anti-globalisation movement.

The new *Debate* series maintains the non-sectarian anti-capitalism of the original series, as well as its core commitment to collective self-management of the magazine’s production. The relaunch of the magazine is just one sign of the revival of the left project in South Africa.

The high quality, and depth and range, of the diverse contributions to issue #5 mark *Debate* out as something special. Issue #6 promises to be even better.

Overseas subscriptions are US\$30 per year for individuals, US\$60 for institutions per year, and US\$50 for supporters. *Debate* can be contacted at PO Box 517, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa or email <debatesa@hotmail.com>.

[Lucien van der Walt is active in the Johannesburg Anti-Privatisation Forum and is an office-bearer of the Workers’ Library and Museum.]