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South Africa: ANC's electricity privatisation opposed

Lucien van der Walt

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JOHANNESBURG — The Anti-Privatisation Forum — an organisation that unites trade unions, township residents' groups, left-wing parties, anarchists and social justice activists — has forthrightly rejected the South African government's plan to privatise the country's electricity utility, Eskom. It is also organising against Eskom's acceleration of electricity cut-offs in Soweto that began on April 1.

The disconnection of poor people's electricity, "brownouts" and incorrect and inflated billing have created misery for tens of thousands of black working-class families in Soweto. Cut-offs, enforced by cable removals and the deactivation of meters under armed guard, are a daily occurrence in the township.

Current Eskom strategy dictates that whole streets — paying consumers as much as defaulters — are punished for electricity payment defaults. Eskom argues that such cut-offs — involving the physical removal of electricity cables by Eskom officials —

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are the only way to prevent illegal reconnections. To reconnect to the power-grid, residents are required to settle all arrears and pay a R640 deposit, as well as a R1200 reconnection fee.

The reason for Eskom's harsh policies is its looming privatisation by the African National Congress government. On March 28, the government tabled legislation in parliament to prepare the ground for privatisation. The Eskom Conversion Bill aims to convert the firm from a statutory body into a public company as the first step in a process that will culminate in the sale of the utility to big business.

This is part of the ANC government's agenda of privatising the country's four big state-owned firms — defence group Denel, power utility Eskom, transport group Transnet and phone firm Telkom — to raise R40 billion by 2004. South African Communist Party minister Jeff Radebe is responsible for the massive sale of the South African people's assets.

Eskom will be restructured into separate transmission, distribution and generation divisions. The government also envisages the formation of different generating companies with direct private sector participation. Eskom is intent on recovering its debts in order to appear profitable and sell for a higher price.

This offensive against South Africans unable to pay electricity charges is only a precursor to the brutality that private service providers will bring. Where people cannot pay, electricity will not be extended and maintained. Whole sections of the townships will revert to apartheid-style darkness. The commercialisation and privatisation of Eskom will lead to a dramatic increase in the number of electricity cut-offs.

Profit will be placed before human need, and the demands of rich shareholders will take precedence over the basic needs of poor working class communities. Full privatisation will undermine the electrification of those communities which are not properly integrated into the electricity grid, as this will not be profitable. Privatisation will also lead to massive retrench-

ments within Eskom, a harsh work intensification for those workers that remain, and a casualisation of the work force. Union-bashing, worker-bashing and community-bashing go hand in hand.

The struggle for free electricity is being led by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) which is affiliated to the APF. The APF's position on electricity cut-offs and the planned privatisation of Eskom is clear: electricity is a right, not a privilege!

Electricity is a basic service that should be provided as a matter of course, and should not be denied to the poor and working class. Where people simply cannot meet Eskom's high electricity bills, due to low wages, or unemployment and retrenchments, Eskom should waive payment and write-off arrears. Basic human rights cannot be bought and sold.

We want an immediate moratorium on all electricity cut-offs.

The APF is opposed to the neo-liberal agenda of subjecting all social services and economic infrastructure and human needs to the free market. This agenda — embodied in the ANC government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic strategy, which calls for cuts in social spending, a flexible and increasingly casualised labour market, the deregulation of capital and trade flows and privatisation — has already led to nearly one million jobs being lost, the deterioration of public sector hospitals, attacks on labour rights and the destruction of large sectors of local industry.