

Harnessing the
opportunities of renewable
energy for the
WORKING CLASS

GLOBAL
SHIFT

BURNING
FOSSIL
FUELS

MIGRATION

SEVERE
CLIMATE
CHANGES

POLLUTION

NEGATIVE
IMPACT

INDUSTRIAL
DEVELOPMENT



In the midst of rapidly growing global and local inequality, it is imperative for us to open up space to not only learn and reflect on the state of our communities and environment, but also to urgently discuss and consider alternatives to the status quo. The needs, hopes and urgencies of the poor and working class should be placed at the centre of alternatives so that these could better serve them.

The use of different forms of energy in our society for performing tasks such as heating, cooking or industrial action involving production and manufacturing of goods, form crucial threads of the fabric of our society. As a result, the problems and opportunities presented by different technologies that generate and distribute forms of energy at different stages in our history have each had their impact on our society. In the case of South Africa this is no different.

It is often stated that energy is essential for life, with heat and light as central elements of the ecosystems in which human society exists. Since the European Industrial Revolution of the late 18th Century, the use of electrical energy in particular became a driving force in factory-based economies throughout the world. South Africa, under colonisation, was among the first territories in the world to make use of electricity for public lighting through the installation of electric street lamps on Adderley Street in Cape Town in 1881. In 1883 (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2017-01-15-visualising-decolonisation-a-comment-on-electricity/>) the railways then became the first bulk electricity consumers in the country working with the newly-established Anglo-African Electric Light Company (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2017-01-15-visualising-decolonisation-a-comment-on-electricity/>). At that moment in history, and to the present day, the extractive mining industry remains one of the economic drivers in the country. The railways were established primarily for the transportation of raw materials such as diamonds, gold and a number of precious metals. The foundations upon which the provision and utilisation of electrical energy were laid rest on practices and economic systems that have visibly resulted in fracturing of communities

through land displacement, migrant labour systems, toxic and harmful treatment of the environment, among many other factors (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/creation-native-reserves-and-migratory-labour-system-south-african-mines>).

With the establishment of the apartheid system in 1948 (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa>), and as a consequence of earlier land removals and the Native Land Act of 1910, fabricated African Bantustans came into existence. The Bantustans were organised provincially and operated indirectly under Afrikaner nationalist rule which provided them with inferior state services and limited budgetary allocations that resulted in deeply unequal networks of water, sanitation and electricity through towns and cities which still exist. Traditional leaders, local government officials and African middle classes enjoyed expanding services, albeit undoubtedly unequal to 'white' areas, while the rural and urban poor and working classes bore the brunt of forced migration, disruption of the possibilities of subsistence farming and enjoyed little prospect of demanding the expansions of public services (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2017-01-15-visualising-decolonisation-a-comment-on-electricity/>).

Through dynamic and ongoing processes of struggle from below, South Africa's late colonial state, the apartheid system, was formally set aside through a national election in 1994 and the adoption of a new Constitution in 1996 (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/south-africas-first-democratic-elections>). With the incoming African National Congress (ANC) held together by the tripartite alliance, including the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) (<http://www.anc.org.za/kids/tripartite-alliance>), a process of 'transformation' was embarked on as a common paradigm through which, in line with the Constitution, democratic reforms of the South African state would be established. This included constructing a national education system from the remnants of a fractured system, expansion of healthcare services, provision of social grants and in principle commitments to the

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provision of basic services. Among these reforms included expansion in provision of access to electricity in both urban and rural areas. In 2014 86% of the national population had access (<http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/resources/energydevelopment/energyaccessdatabase/>). In 1996 the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy was introduced as the national economic policy by the ANC and it opened the door for deepening privatisation, austerity measures and is credited by many on the left as undermining the already limited capacity of the state to provide social welfare (<https://mg.co.za/article/1998-01-16-cosatu-to-fight-gear>).

Turning our gaze towards the present, recent considerable advances in renewable energy technologies have created possibilities for wide-ranging scales of utilisation (<http://www.ren21.net/status-of-renewables/global-status-report/>). This arrives in an environment where South Africa's electrical generation history has been heavily dependent on massive coal fired power stations in particular. With this opportunity comes a dual risk, as the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) carefully articulated at a conference in June 2015. They called for civil society action and unity around a need to address the ongoing energy crisis by building from below using education and mobilisation in an attempt to counteract, in part, the potential for the private sector to capitalise on the coming wave of opportunities for renewable energy technology-based development.

The sheer flexibility of scale with technologies such as solar panels, that have already found widespread use in urban low cost housing and rural applications alike, have created the potential for residential electrification without the need to establish large industrial plants. A central question then, emanating from the historical trends emphasised above, is to ask how we can support

organisations and communities towards thinking around alternatives that prioritise collective ownership and public goods, as opposed to deepening our dependency on expensive expertise alienated from the environments in which the alternatives could prove most beneficial.

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In advocating for more collective forms of ownership and development of renewable energy systems based in communities, many have emphasised the need to make use of existing public spaces such as schools, community centres and clinics as possible natural starting points into building decentralised energy alternatives to coal from below (<http://worldviewmission.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/WM-Agendschap-nl-875-Presentatie-Riaz-Jogiat-role-municipalities.pdf>).

The latest opposition to the South African government's push towards expanding its nuclear energy capabilities (in what would be one of the largest South African tenders in its history) provides an important opportunity for us to collectively and intentionally engage and educate one another around who owns and controls

- the naturally available resources in our environment and interrogate who benefits most from their use. If we work together we can build and strengthen existing movements that link energy issues to pertinent issues such as unemployment, food sovereignty and access to safe drinking water to ensure that the opportunities opened up by renewable energy technologies are taken advantage of for the benefit of the poor and working class in pursuit of sustainable alternatives worth fighting for.

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ENERGY AND WATER SECTOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING AUTHORITY

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