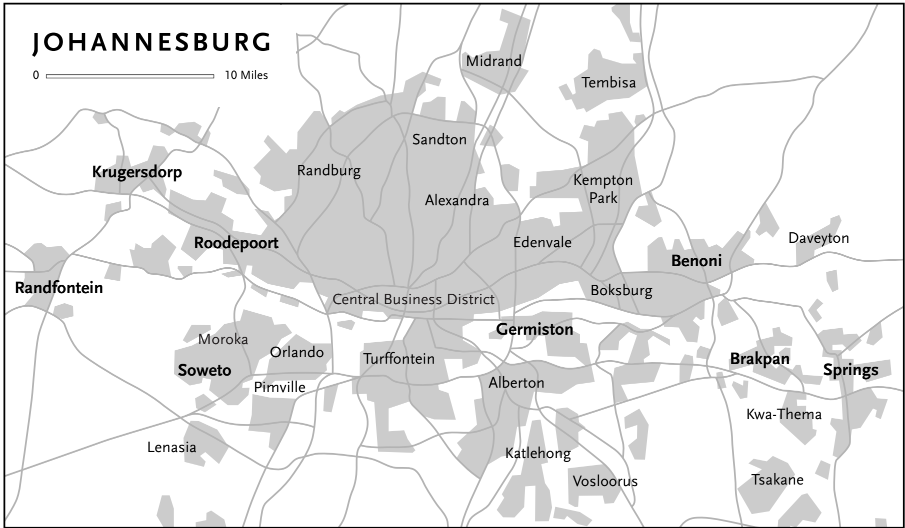

ZIMBABWE
MOZAMBIQUE
BOTSWANA
LIMPOPO
PROVINCE
Pietersburg
NAMIBIA
GAUTENG
Pretoria
Nelspruit
MPUMA-
LANGA
Mmabatho
Johannesburg
SWAZI-
LAND
NORTH-WEST
Newcastle
FREE STATE
Ulundi
Kimberley
NORTHERN CAPE
Bloemfontein
KWAZULU
-NATAL
LESOTHO
Durban
EASTERN CAPE
SOUTH AFRICA
Atlantic
Ocean
EASTERN CAPE
Indian Ocean
Bisho
WESTERN CAPE
Cape Town
Port Elizabeth
0
200 Miles

TREVOR NGWANE

SPARKS IN THE TOWNSHIP

Where were you born and brought up, and what was your family background?

I was born in 1960 in Durban. My father and mother were medical nurses. My grandfathers were both Presbyterian preachers, from Zululand. My father was an ANC supporter. He spent some time in Dar es Salaam when I was small. I'm not sure that he went because of politics: people got out for lots of reasons, for opportunities or dignity. He came back for the sake of the family. But anyone who had been abroad was targeted by the Special Branch once they returned to South Africa. Although he was not really active, they used to visit him every week or so when I was a child; he died more or less a broken man. He definitely had an influence on me. I remember him showing me some political books: there was one in a brown-paper cover, so I never knew the author or title. When I was six we moved to Zululand. My parents worked in a hospital there run by a Scottish missionary, who tried to work along progressive lines. There was a black Jesus in the chapel, for example—that was something in those days; we used to point him out to each other. At that time, Buthelezi was considered quite a hero—he refused to accept 'independent homeland' status for Zululand, toured the country speaking out for black people and met with the ANC. Even my father was fooled when he set up Inkatha with the colours black, green, gold: 'It's the colours of the ANC!' he told me; only the older people knew that then.

After my parents separated my brother and I were sent to a Catholic boarding school, run by the Dominicans, near Durban. My mother thought it was the best school around but it had a really strict regime,

with punishments for everything. The food was terrible, too. I was there for four years—I was expelled after the school strike in 1976. Not that I was particularly political: more of a rebel in a generic sense, getting caught out of bounds, or drinking. But there was a spontaneous strike at our school after the police massacres in Soweto on June 16, 1976. The situation was very tense. Some students came in to talk to us; they had more experience and were at the forefront of the boycott. I didn't play much of a part but these things quickly affect everyone. We felt under very strong pressure. We were all expelled, sent home. A month later the school authorities handpicked the ones they wanted to return. But they told my brother and me not to come back—they had some problem with me. After that I transferred to a township school in Newcastle, on the other side of Natal, where my father was living. I matriculated there.

In 1979 I started at Fort Hare, in the Eastern Cape. It's the oldest black university in South Africa; Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo went there. I studied sociology, although at first I was enrolled for a BA in Personnel Management. When I arrived, there was the normal hullabaloo about which course to take. We were shoved around and didn't get proper guidance, and this was a special new syllabus that they wanted to recruit students to. We studied sociology, industrial psychology, statistics, other social-science subjects. It made a big impact on me—at first, not politically: I was just fascinated by the ideas, and a whole new world opened up. It must have been around this time that I stopped believing in God.

Sociology was a bit better than some of the courses: there were a few black lecturers who tried to put the other side; Eastern Cape was a political place and Fort Hare has that prestige. We read dependency theory as well as the classics: Durkheim, Weber. There was a special course, 'development policy and administration', where we learned about the Group Areas Act and apartheid policy. It was meant to train young blacks in apartheid administration but it was taught by a good teacher, Mike Sham, who tried to give us a different perspective. He used to lend me books. But there was also the baptism by fire of the grading system. Many of the courses that were strategic for black students—statistics, anthropology, accounting—had something like a 10 per cent pass rate. Some people got a low mark on their first test and never recovered. But each one counted, and if you didn't get around 50 per cent overall, you failed the course. Come September, all those who didn't make the year mark had to face the ritual of returning home. Typically, some of them

were your friends. It was the expulsions, I think, that made for the solidarity among us, when there were outbreaks of defiance.

What was the political atmosphere like?

The country wasn't yet on fire, but there were things going on. When Mozambique got its independence in 1980 there were student demonstrations and class boycotts in support of FRELIMO. A group of students put up a manifesto, signed with a popular name—something with a bit of mystique, like 'The Wolf Man'—and we all read it. This happened three or four times. Then there was a meeting in the Great Hall. Everyone came to listen to the debate; it was quite democratic. I wasn't really political yet, but the atmosphere was so highly charged: not only in the country, in terms of people striving for freedom, liberation; but with FRELIMO showing the way, the possibility. There was hope. But also we felt, at least myself and my friends, that we were so oppressed in that university. Everyone shared a sense of relief and wanted to support the boycott; there was no question of breaking it—perhaps one or two people might have tried, but it was too strong. So we were all expelled for 'political disturbances', as they were called. The same thing was happening at every black university. After a month you could reapply and the authorities would select who they wanted.

By this stage I was starting to develop a more conscious critique of apartheid; there were a couple of guys who used to challenge us to think more constructively. But we weren't discussing politics all the time. For us, it was a question of surviving the courses, passing, failing—and then, if there was a student strike, a boycott, we all went for it; there was a lot of solidarity. In 1982 there were more protests and they expelled us again. But this time we decided, nearly all of us, that we would not go back because we were so poorly treated. We knew they would exclude all our leaders, the so-called agitators. So we stayed out, apart from a few. They are still known as 'the defenders'. Someone should write a book about them: the black guys who now defend the corporate world betrayed us even earlier.

What did you do after the expulsion from university?

I moved to Soweto. I phoned a research agency that I had worked for during the June holidays and got a job there. Meanwhile, I carried

on with my degree by correspondence course through the University of South Africa. The agency turned out to be the research wing of a government parastatal for apartheid engineering, developing personnel management strategies—aptitude tests for mineworkers, supervisors and so on. The pass laws were still in force—they'd ask for your pass and arrest you if you didn't have it—and the 8 o'clock curfew. When I arrived here I didn't have anywhere to stay. I squatted around in different parts of Soweto, including the Salvation Army, until I found a place. First I was living in a backroom, then I graduated to a backyard garage. That was bigger, but there were insulation problems, what with the roll-down door and everything.

This was the time of the 1984–86 township rebellions. What was your involvement with the movement, and what were its effects on your own political development ?

Soweto was burning—it affected everyone. At that stage I was doing a full-time masters degree at Wits University, in downtown Johannesburg. I worked there as a tutor, then junior lecturer, till 88 and it was in those years that I became a Marxist. There was a small group of us who are still close comrades, who would read and talk things through; they've seen me through a lot. Though I was only in my twenties I had my own course, 'Class and Nationalism', lecturing on the youth of the ANC, the Pan-African Congress, Afrikaner nationalism and the South African Communist Party. Our orientation was towards the ANC: we supported the workers who wanted to fashion it as a weapon of struggle, and always argued against the two-stage theory. 'We unban the ANC!' was one of our slogans. But at that point the link for me was more of an intellectual one than actual involvement on the ground. For example, some youths came to demand my car—that's the kind of thing that would happen—but my room was so full of posters about the struggle that I convinced them I knew their leadership, which saved the car. And I did have Winnie Mandela in one of my classes. Each week, one of the students would present and teach a class and on Winnie's day, she came dressed in full ANC regalia with a prepared speech about the movement. We even managed to use banned material in my course reader—Marx, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Slovo, the whole lot. During the wave of mass arrests when the State of Emergency was declared in 1986 one of my students, Pascal Moloi, got detained. So we took his course work and all this material into jail. It was a popular thing.

Those were heady days for me. We had radical ideas about reading policy and the role of education. I decided I didn't want to make the students go through the exam system; I would hand them the question papers two or three days before, against regulations. We watched a video once a week, read books, used the amazing library. Then an ex-mine worker who'd come to the department for the 'Sociology of Work' programme, a Lesotho politico, started showing the videos to the university workers, who'd been cleaning the blackboards for twenty years but could barely read or write. Being political, he would give a short talk, before or after; then the workers started interrupting to say their bit. Soon we commandeered the tea room to start teaching them to read and write; my students all joined in. This was what mushroomed into the Wits Workers Literacy Project—it grew and grew, and started attracting railway workers, shop workers. I'd got squeezed out of my department, though there was a big campaign for my reinstatement, so I started teaching at the Literacy Project instead.

What was your assessment of the negotiations that followed Mandela's release from jail in 1990, and the unbanning of the ANC and SACP? To what extent were the rank and file privy to what was going on—or did they simply want to trust the ANC regardless?

I remember turning on the radio and hearing: 'The ANC announced today that the armed struggle has been suspended'. We couldn't believe it—it was like chopping off an arm and a leg. Of course, they never did anything much but we used to romanticize it; that little bomb at the Wimpy Bar won them so much support in the country. People wanted to trust them, naturally, but there was opposition to the direction the negotiations were taking. Mandela used his gigantic stature to contain it. In January 1990 he'd announced—in the note smuggled out from Pollsmoor Prison—that nationalization continued to be the policy of the ANC; 'growth through redistribution' was the line. By September 93 he was touring Western capitals with the National Party Finance Minister, Derek Keys, speaking at the UN, pleading for foreign investment and guaranteeing the repatriation of profits and capital-protection measures.

Without detracting from those twenty-seven years in jail—what that cost him, what he stood for—Mandela has been the real sellout, the biggest betrayer of his people. When it came to the crunch, he used his status to camouflage the actual agreement that the ANC was forging with the

South African elite under the sugar-coating of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. Basically the ANC was granted formal, administrative power, while the wealth of the country was retained in the hands of the white capitalist elite, Oppenheimer and company. Mandela's role was decisive in stabilizing the new dispensation; by all accounts, a daring gamble on the part of the bourgeoisie.

I was working with the Transport Workers Union at that time, between 91 and 93, as a political education officer; I'd joined the ANC in 1990. The feeling in the trade-union movement was triumphant: we were really hitting the bosses, now they felt forced to invite us to sit down, to give us all sorts of things. The reality was just the opposite: because the bosses were on the back foot they had gone on the attack. They deployed the ideology of tripartism—the golden triangle of labour–government–capital—to trap the unions in 'codetermination' discussions on how to maximize company profits and productivity. The way they did it was supremely flattering to the middling union officials. Don't forget South Africa had one of the most unionized working classes in the world—something like 23 per cent of the economically active population in 1994. Between them, the two independent trade-union federations, FOSATU and COSATU, had 3.2 million members and 25,000 elected shop stewards. Their role was going to be vital in stabilizing the new order, supporting what they called the 'export-oriented economy'. Of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union had made a big difference—a disarming and disorienting world event which the bourgeoisie took full advantage of to argue that there was no alternative.

At the same time, there were big struggles going on inside the trade-union movement, between the more 'workerist', plant-based FOSATU faction and the 'populist', UDF-aligned COSATU, with closer ties in the communities. Sometimes it got physical. There were also real fights between the black consciousness forces and the ANC; blood was flowing. The returning ANC leadership had to graft itself onto the mass democratic movement. They started by closing down the other structures, in the name of unity: 'Why do you need your own Youth Congress? We have the Youth League'; 'Why do you need the Transvaal Federation of Women? We have the Women's League'. There was also a lot of destabilization going on: the dirty war organized by the security forces, provoking bloodshed. That strengthened the hand of those calling for 'unity'.

There was opposition in the trade unions to the line the leadership was taking. But, to quite a large extent, this was either bought off or repressed by the ANC–SACP COSATU officials. For instance, I wrote a paper in 1993 called 'Is Holding Hands with the Bosses the way for New South Africa?' that was critical of COSATU's codetermination policies. I was expelled, then reinstated after a big campaign, then expelled again in 1995. That's carried on. John Appolis, the Chemical Workers' leader, has just been fired by the union for his role in the anti-privatization struggle. Whereas Alec Erwin, once a big trade-union figure and defender of workers' democracy, is now Minister of Trade and Industry, pushing neoliberal policies. Moses Mayekiso from the Metalworkers' Union, who was once *the* socialist leader, has been promoting every World Bank initiative through the National Civic Organization, SANCO. Now he's caught up in an investment-company scam.

The first one-person, one-vote municipal elections in South Africa came a year and a half after the ANC's watershed victory in 1994. You were elected as a councillor for the Pimville ward in Soweto, on the ANC ticket. What space was there then for progressive politics at the municipal level? How much of a change, with the ending of apartheid?

It was a real change after apartheid. Before that, local government had been run strictly along black and white lines, so Soweto had its black local authority, Sandton a white one. In 1995 that was reorganized so that the black areas were no longer isolated: Soweto was divided in two, with Pimville and Orlando East joined to Randburg, in the north, and the rest linked to the Central Business District, so that redistributive policies became a real possibility. The same went for the other townships; Alexandra was linked to Sandton. The Johannesburg Metro, a city-wide municipality, was superimposed overall. The Reconstruction and Development Programme had a component of 'people-driven development': local labour had to be used for building projects and each community had to come up with its own development objectives. My first job in the Pimville ward was to call public meetings, with representatives from the civic, the community organizations, the ANC, to draw up a participatory budget where the local people could list their own priorities.

We ran into problems within a matter of months. The contractors tried to turn the local-employment policy against the working class by using

casual labour, undocumented migrants. We dealt with that by enforcing a minimum wage of 50 rand per day, around $7, on every contract tendered: 'You can employ casual labour but you have to pay the minimum wage'. The employers complained to the Metro council, claiming this was an 'obstacle to development'. I was 'investigated' over the 50-rand wage; there was a bit of a witch-hunt. They would bribe local leaders to soften the rules, so they could pay less. It soon became clear that the bureaucracy was frowning on community control. Officials would talk about 'the contradiction between development and democracy' and the councillors weren't strong enough to question that. A lot of them were naïve and well-meaning but didn't really know what they wanted to do. The bureaucrats had an interest in undermining them—they would prepare the agendas, decide how many meetings there should be. Of course, this couldn't have happened without the ANC's tacit consent. The mood changed within the ruling ANC caucus: robust debates became muted; decisions were taken away from councillors and we were discouraged from participating in local community forums. There were issues we couldn't discuss.

The crunch came when they announced a big financial crisis for Johannesburg; they had 'just realized' the city was in the red. This was in 1997, a year after the national currency crisis, when the ANC effectively ditched the RDP for GEAR, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme—a thorough-going privatization–deregulation strategy, involving savage public-sector cutbacks, loosened exchange controls and a regressive sales-tax policy. All the Johannesburg ANC councillors were called to an emergency caucus meeting—you could see it was a coordinated effort—for a long PowerPoint presentation, followed by three minutes of questions. All the 'people's budgets' had to be frozen. I argued, 'But comrades, when there's less money, all the more reason to be democratic'. But they didn't want to hear that. The next budget was put together by experts, special whizz kids. Again, the plan was unveiled with PowerPoint—we joked about how 'the words fall from the sky like rain'; one hour's presentation and a couple of questions. After that they started to target people more systematically, or coopt them for well-paid committee jobs.

In 1999, just after the second general election confirmed Mbeki in power, the council introduced their comprehensive privatization plan for the city, Igoli 2002. There would be massive cutbacks, around twenty thousand

job losses, and everything would be put out to tender—water, electricity, garbage collection, sewage. *Igoli* is the Zulu word for Johannesburg. I called it E. coli 2002, because the water privatization soon had sewage leaking into the water table. At this time, Mbeki was using the phrase, 'The people have spoken', to imply that if people had voted for the ANC they must support its neoliberal policies and shouldn't now oppose them. I wrote a piece for the newspaper called 'The People Have Not Spoken', a debate between the city manager, the trade union—SAMWU, the municipal workers' union, had come out against the plan—and myself, putting the views of my constituents. The piece was by invitation, though I didn't write it without discussing it with my comrades. I decided it had to be done.

Within three days, the ANC suspended me from all my positions, including those in the Council. I faced a disciplinary hearing for bringing the Party into disrepute. They then tried to make a deal, saying, 'OK, if you publicly recant your statements, we'll reduce the two years' suspension to nine months'. The timing was calculated to coincide with the local government elections in 2000. They were offering me the chance to run again. I went to my constituents, and they said 'No, you can't apologise'. It was then that I became an independent.

What sort of problems were Sowetans facing at this stage? What did the city's restructuring programme entail?

The privatizations envisaged in Igoli 2002 were premised on 'cost-recovery': that is, once the basic infrastructure had been set up—with corners often cut in the process—the citizens were supposed to cover whatever costs the utility companies demanded for maintenance and supply. The problems, and the pace of privatization, varied according to the utility. Take electricity. ESKOM—the Afrikaans acronym for the Electricity Supply Commission—had been established as the engine for the apartheid state's mining–mineral complex. It absorbed over half the World Bank's $200 million credits to South Africa during the fifties and sixties, supplying cut-price power to white-owned industries while the majority of blacks went without domestic electricity. To this day, most poor blacks rely for their lighting, cooking and heating on paraffin, coal and wood—you can smell the coal smoke over the settlements when the evening meals are being cooked. Electricity only really reached the townships in the eighties. The main dwellings were supplied with cables

and metres, and the backyard shacks and garages would have to run a wire from there.

Under the apartheid regime there was a fixed payment for services. But under the ANC, as ESKOM was readied for privatization, they began to charge per kilowatt hour. In 1999, Soweto electricity prices rose by 47 per cent. In Soweto, average bills in the summer are around 150 rand per month, or $20; in the winter they soar to 500 rand, nearly $70, when the average monthly income for over half Soweto's households is only 1,500 rand, just over $200. From the spring of 2001 ESKOM started to implement a drastic cut-off strategy for households overdue on payments—the company's 'debtor book' was apparently scaring off private buyers and there was disapproving talk of the townships having a 'culture of non-payment', a legacy of the rent and service boycotts of the eighties. In some cases, the Johannesburg Council further tightened the screw by cutting off people's water too.

Was this when the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee was formed?

It had begun earlier, in June 2000, when we ran a series of workshops on the energy crisis; then we started having mass meetings in the township. We got some research done by Wits University, a project organized by Patrick Bond, Maj Fiil-Flynn and other comrades. Their survey, 'Electricity Crisis in Soweto'—it's on the web at www.queensu.ca/msp—showed what we already suspected: that most of the residents were working-class pensioners or unemployed, with lots of grannies as heads of households; that most of them did try to pay their bills, though there was such poor service at the local ESKOM offices that they often had to queue all day on payment days. But the prices were out of their range: 89 per cent of them were in arrears, 61 per cent had had their power cut off by ESKOM in the past year alone—they couldn't cook or run refrigerators, it was back to coal and paraffin to heat and light their homes. The draft report came out in April 2001, just when ESKOM was stepping up the cut-offs to around 120,000 households a month nationwide. The ANC had been boasting that they'd brought electricity to millions of black households, but by 2001 more people were losing access every month than were gaining it. We called a Soweto-wide mass meeting and people came in their hundreds.

How is the SECC organized on the ground and what has been the focus of its activities?

We have around 22 branches in Soweto, each one with their own organizing committee—we reckon around 7,000 members in all. We've had a debate about membership cards. At the moment the position is, you can join and get a card for 10 rand a year, or you can just be a member. I don't have a card—my position is, everyone is a member who wants to be. We have an AGM every year on March 1st, and directly elected officials: chair, secretary, treasurer. Every Tuesday there's a committee meeting of representatives from the branches, around sixty people, where we get reports on problems, organize speakers for meetings and so on. We've had funding from War on Want, and this year we've got a US Public Welfare Foundation grant which we're going to use to employ an organizer and open an office, even if it's just for one year.

One of the first things we did was to launch Operation Khanyisa—*khanyisa* means light—where we reconnect people's electricity supply when it's been cut off. We trained local people how to do this. Within six months, over 3,000 households had been put back on the grid. We found that a lot of people were already illegally connected, through bribing ESKOM employees. When we raised the question in mass meetings it would come as a relief to everyone to find that their neighbours were illegally connected too—they'd all been hiding it from each other. We turned what was a criminal deed from the point of view of ESKOM into an act of defiance. It was good tactics and good politics. We organized a lot of protest marches, including going to city councillors' houses to cut off their electricity, to give them a taste of their own medicine, and to the mayor's office in Soweto. When they targeted our leaders for arrest after a councillor's supply was cut, five hundred Sowetans marched to Moroka Police Station to present themselves for mass arrest; the police were overwhelmed.

By October 2001 ESKOM had retreated: they announced a moratorium on cut-offs. That gave us a victory under our belts. In December 2001 Jeff Radebe, the ANC Public Enterprise Minister and a leading SACP member, came to Orlando Hall in Soweto to offer a partial amnesty on arrears. We said that wasn't enough. Our demands are electricity for everyone, including the urban settlements and poor rural villages that don't have any supply yet; scrapping all arrears; the free basic supply the ANC

promised in the 2000 municipal elections and a flat-rate monthly price that people can budget for—a demand that we won in the 1980s from the apartheid regime. It's sad that Sowetans are now back to fighting for this from their own democratic government. We also oppose the privatization scheme that Radebe is still trying to push through. Recently, ESKOM has been installing pre-pay meters, a pilot scheme. That's our current campaign: marching to remove the pre-pay meters—or bypassing them, if people prefer—and dumping them at the mayor's office, at ESKOM, at the council. This is giving us new strength.

What led to the march on Mayor Amos Masondo's house?

Masondo had stood in the 2000 municipal elections on Mbeki's pledge of free basic water and electricity and though only a few people went to the polls, that was what they were voting for. By the end of the year they had got nothing. I was on national TV saying that the promises had just been an election ploy. People were beginning to call them liars. So the ANC announced that they would start a programme on July 1, 2001. On June 30, we all took a *kombi*—a minibus—to the mayor's house in Kensington and cut off his supply, to remind him that he had to give us the free water and electricity the next day. We know him personally because, though he lives in the suburb now, he comes from Moletsane. In fact, he left his mother there. Our movement has many pensioners, so this is a humiliation for him. At the time, Masondo downplayed the meeting to the press, but the next year, 2002, when we went to his house again after the mayor's office refused to respond to our demands, he was still complaining about it: 'You guys, you're undisciplined! It's very bad when you come to my house'.

The comrades weren't prepared to swallow this. We reported back to the meeting in Soweto and a resolution was passed that we would all go to his house the weekend after Easter. We took a bus this time and, as fate would have it, we got there in a mean mood, even the grannies and the old people. Masondo's bodyguard opened fire and we had to run for our lives. After that, all hell broke loose. Oddly, there was a truck of municipal workers there, collecting garbage, and they let us help ourselves. The comrades poured rubbish in his swimming pool, cut his water, cut his lights. In the end, eighty-seven of us got arrested. They used the law that allows them to keep us for seven days without bail, but we managed to mobilize even more people, each time we appeared in court. We became

known as the Kensington 87. It was only in March 2003 that we were finally cleared.

Could you tell us about the Anti-Privatization Forum? Was this set up at the same time as the SECC?

The Anti-Privatization Forum is a broader coalition of several dozen groups, with SECC one of the most active. But both grew out of the campaigns against Igoli 2002. The APF really came together in July 2000, when a lot of different organizations—the Anti-Igoli 2002 Committee, the Municipal Workers' Union, the Education Workers, NGOs, students, even the SACP to begin with—came together to protest against a big international conference on privatization, 'Urban Futures', that was being held at Wits University. We set up the APF with very simple terms of reference: 'We are not here to debate privatization, or find some 'third way' to finesse it. Everyone here has decided that privatization is bad, and wants to do something to fight it'. Because at that time there were a lot of think-tanks, debates, NGOs and so on that saw their job as derailing anti-privatization struggles. The ANC instructed the union leaderships to keep away, although the municipal workers stayed with us for longer.

The main campaigns fought by the APF have been around water, electricity, evictions. We have a central office at Cosatu House, in downtown Johannesburg, that gets some funding from War on Want, and clusters of affiliated groups in the communities. In Vaal, to the south, for instance, there is the Bophelong Community Forum, the Working-Class Community Coordinating Committee and three others. In the east, we have the Kathorus Concerned Residents, the United Physics of South Africa, the Vosloorus and Daveyton Peace Committee Civic. Then there's the Johannesburg cluster; Soweto and Orange Farm, the Thembelihle Committee, two affiliates in Alexandra, three new ones in the North West Province. The APF Executive Committee meets fortnightly, with a representative from each affiliated organization, and we have a Coordinating Committee that meets monthly, with five representatives from each group. We are trying to organize regional solidarity committees so that people can come out to support each other immediately they hear about an eviction or a water cut-off. In Thembelihle, an informal shack settlement of some 4,000 stands, they're facing forced removals—often at night. That's when the City Council send the security men in, the Red Ants as they're known, from the colour of their overalls. Two or

three thousand people will turn out to stop the evictions there, because the whole community is under threat. The Council says they have to be moved because the area is dolomitic; but the place they're being shifted to, ten kilometres out, is dolomitic too. Who knows what the real reasons are—it might be class or race: the settlement's next to a middle-class community, largely Asian, that might find the corrugated structures an eyesore.

Emily Nengolo, an activist in the Orange Farm Water Crisis Committee, was shot in her home in February this year in what seems to have been a politically motivated killing. How much violence and harassment does the ANC employ against the poor in the settlements, and against anti-privatization campaigners?

If you want to shift people from the place they've lived in for fifteen years—and from one shack to another, not to proper housing—then you have to bring in the Red Ants, the crowbars, the back-up police. With electricity cut-offs, violence can be unavoidable. People chase away the ESKOM men who've come to do the work, and the police are called; in Soweto, ESKOM employs its own security company. As to harassing campaigners: they arrest us during marches—you have to apply for permission and they can turn you down, or give permission with restrictions. For instance, during the Kensington 87 trials they said we could picket, but only 200 metres from the court, out of sight. Then people defy that, and the police are called. They use tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannon. It's not all-out violence, but you are threatened with it the whole time—it's always there. Emily's killing was clearly politically motivated, but that could be the specificities of the area, rather than the ANC centre; the local leadership is trigger happy.

To what extent do the APF and SECC draw on the townships' established networks of resistance—or is this wave of struggles something new?

It is a new wave, but it uses the traditions, the fire, the experience of the old days. The SECC is becoming more like a civic; people come to us with their problems because we are the official opposition in Soweto now. The ANC promote us, by attacking us as anti-ANC in their speeches. When they call meetings—and it's always councillors, never the party that does so—we go along to picket them; but they would never dare come to ours.

How has the city itself changed since the apartheid era?

The most striking differences have been the mushrooming of the informal settlements, the transformation of the Central Business District and the new 'edge cities' where big business has relocated to the outer suburbs. In Soweto, the changes have been more gradual: new home-loan developments, in-fill building, more overcrowding with backyard shacks springing up behind the old four-room council houses, now transferred to private ownership; though the Council is trying to reduce the shacks to two per yard. During apartheid, you were always under the thumb of the township manager, inevitably an Afrikaner. A house would be allocated to you; you had to register each child as it was born to allow it to live there. At sixteen, the township manager could say your son had to be sent to a hostel. The idea was total control. A visitor had to have a permit. The Metropolitan Police would check on the Permit List and you could lose the house if their name wasn't on it. They clamped down on overcrowding—influx control, they called it—by sending people back to the homelands. If a husband died, the widow could be sent away. You couldn't put up a shack at the back then without the township manager knowing, though you could get permission for backrooms and garages, where people used to live. Once that repression lifted people started to build where they could—families growing, people coming in, or spilling over. Shack settlements grew up around Soweto. The Sowetan residents would have first preference, or act as landlord for a whole new area.

The changes in the Central Business District have been far more dramatic. That was an all-white area during apartheid, very hostile, with a lot of harassment of blacks. In the late eighties and early nineties there was a big shift of business headquarters to Sandton, in the northern suburbs. Symbolically, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange relocated there, although the big banks have tended to stay in the centre. Whites who had been living in the multi-storey apartment blocks moved out in droves. The landlords made a killing, renting out empty flats and offices to black working-class incomers from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Mozambique, Somalia, Zimbabwe. They could crowd ten people into a bachelor flat for 200 rand per month each, without providing proper services. Some of the buildings have been taken over by tenants' committees. Some succeed; others, where the committee takes over the role of the landlord, have been a disaster.

Some people have rejoiced in the emergence of an 'informal city' in central Johannesburg—Saskia Sassen, for instance—hailing it as a 'new space'. This seems to parallel earlier claims that 'black economic empowerment' would sprout from the informal economy.

Formal business has certainly decayed in the city centre, with empty shops, boarded-up office blocks. Maybe a black guy will buy a shop and start selling *pap*, the local food, but there's been no boom of black businesses—prices are still high, and because of the Group Areas Act it's mainly Asians who own the shops and warehouses. There are plenty of traders and hawkers in the streets now, ladies doing other ladies' hair for money and services like that. There are big working-class taxi ranks because the public transport is so bad. But the general economic tendency is very clear: the rich have got richer and the poor poorer. Under the ANC, South Africa has now surpassed Brazil as the most unequal country in the world. According to *Statistics South Africa*, the average African household has got 19 per cent poorer in the past five years, and the average white household 15 per cent richer. Unemployment is now running at 43 per cent of the workforce, with youth unemployment up to 80 per cent in some rural areas. We've lost more than a million jobs. Basic food prices have been soaring. What with the public-spending cuts and the Aids crisis, the situation in the health service is frightening.

As for the 'informal city', it may look more colourful but power relations haven't gone away. The banks and insurance companies have held on to their real estate there, and built themselves huge, fortified complexes with easy access to the arterial freeways out to the suburbs. Now the Council has decided it wants to clean up the Central Business District again. They've targeted over eighty buildings to clear out, through forced evictions. They're trying to limit the traders to certain streets and they are building huge, multi-storey taxi ranks that look like giant prisons, for the *kombis*. Once again, it's a question of control. The hawkers will be given space inside these blocks, so they can't be seen. The Council has set up a new Metropolitan Police Force—the most hated body from the height of the apartheid era. They've got advisers in from the NYPD to train them in Broken Mirror police theory: zero tolerance. The city is becoming a hostile place again. The ordinary police will stop you, especially if you look too dark, and demand to see your papers, just like before. There's a lot of hostility towards undocumented immigrants. Sometimes the Red Ants are used to cordon off a whole area and if

you find yourself inside, without ID, you can get sent off to a detention camp at Lindelani, 50 kilometres from Johannesburg, and processed for deportation. They have trains from there to Mozambique and other places. The camp is run by prominent leaders of the ANC Women's League and operated like a private prison. The government pays per person processed.

How would you compare Mandela's role with that of Mbeki?

Mandela did what many African statesmen try to do: play the role of Caesar. He has freed himself from formal politics so that he can act the grandfather. He can swan in and out, chide the government, cover for Mbeki's stubbornness on AIDS, publicly criticize George Bush—which of course is what Mbeki should be doing. Mandela regularly pops up on TV opening a clinic or a school in the rural areas, sponsored by capital. It shows the great partnership between the private sector, government and people. He likes to behave like Father Christmas: above politics. But whenever there is a crisis, Mandela will be there to oil, smooth and con.

Their styles are very different. Mandela used to run the national ANC meetings like a chief—he would let everyone discuss, and then make the ruling. He's famous for phoning comrades at 3am and calling them 'My boy' in Xhosa, which means you are uncircumcized; an insult, but he gets away with it because of his charisma. Mbeki is much stiffer. He was trained at the Lenin Institute and spent a long time bag-carrying for Oliver Tambo in diplomatic circles in the West. He thinks he is an intellectual but he just talks in convoluted sentences. Internationally he is seen as the sober African statesman, beloved of the World Bank, who is going to help pull the continent up by its bootstraps. But he is quite widely despised, inside the country. Our march at the World Summit on Sustainable Development on 31 August last year was a humiliation for him, it exposed his weakness in his own home-base—we got 20,000 and he could only muster 3,000 even though he had COSATU, the SACP and the South African Council of Churches lined up behind him. He has made a series of blunders: Zimbabwe, AIDS, a corrupt $5 billion arms deal, letting his insecurity and paranoia show in his attacks on Cyril Ramaphosa and Tokyo Sexwale. His supporters are getting worried. Mandela might have to come in and clean up. Because the real point is that their politics are exactly the same: they share a common project, an identical orientation.

Despite the new groundswell against their neoliberal policies, the ANC can still bank on its popular legitimacy from the anti-apartheid days. What are the prospects of building an independent left alternative and what elements might this contain? Are there any signs of cracks in the ANC–SACP–COSATU alliance?

We do need such a force, but this is still a long way off. When Mbeki attacks the COSATU leaders and the SACP, calling them 'ultra-left'—as he did when he felt threatened by the scale of the anti-privatization mobilization around the WSSD summit—he is basically whipping them into line. And it works. The SACP immediately declared, 'This is our government, our ANC. We will defend it'. The president of COSATU, Willie Madisha, announced: 'We must not let our disagreements overshadow the many areas of agreement'. Mbeki needs COSATU and the SACP to contain the working class and deliver the votes. There's no way he wants to break up the alliance; he just doesn't want them to cross a certain line. There was some vague talk of the SACP running independent candidates, though not in the 2004 elections—but what politics could they stand on that would be distinct from the ANC's?

Nevertheless, workers are losing jobs and the COSATU leadership are under pressure to respond. That's why they hold their yearly general strike—we now call it an Annual General Meeting, because it's such a regular event. They always reassure Mbeki that they are not attacking the ANC but this year's strike, though smaller, was militantly opposed to the government's privatization policy. The workers burned pictures of Mbhazima Shilowa—a former general secretary of COSATU, now the premier of Gauteng Province, the industrial heartland—and shouted him down when he tried to address them, despite the COSATU bosses on the platform chanting 'Viva ANC, Viva Shilowa'. The leadership has captured the bodies of the workers but their souls are wandering around. One day they will connect with other bodies.

Some in the anti-globalization movement say that the working class is finished, that the social movements or even 'civil society' itself are now the leading force for change. But if we're honest, some of these social movements consist of nothing more than an office and a big grant from somewhere or other. They can call a workshop, pay people to attend, give them a nice meal and then write up a good report. They build nothing on the ground. 'Civil society' can be even more problematic, extending to the business sector and to NGOs tendering for contracts for privatized

government services. Of course the working class faces greater obstacles, both political and organizational, with the neoliberal turn of the ANC and other mass parties, and the casualization and de-unionization of labour. But it remains a key component of any alternative left strategy. The high level of unemployment is a real problem here. It does make workers more cautious. We need to organize both the employed and the unemployed, to overcome capital's divide-and-conquer tactics.

What is your assessment of the World Social Forum?

Many on the left here were quite sceptical about the anti-globalization movement to begin with. Naturally, it came under attack from the ANC—people like Trevor Manuel, the finance minister, dismissed it as bored rich kids having fun: 'What do they know about covert struggle? They wouldn't last a day in Robben Island'. But though the WSF has its strengths and weaknesses it is important for us to link up to it: this is the movement of the millennium. Personally, I found the discussion of different methods of struggle at Porto Alegre a very useful one. It was an inspiration to meet up with people from La Coordinadora in Bolivia, Oscar Olivera and others, to find out about what's been going on in the fight against water privatization there. That sort of solidarity can be very powerful in terms of keeping you going through pauses in the struggle.

How would you define the main priorities of the movement?

In terms of general questions, I think the issue of political power remains crucial. Some people attack the idea of targeting state power—the argument that globalization undermines the role of the nation state gets translated into an excuse for avoiding the fight with your own national bourgeoisie. But we in South Africa can't not confront the ANC and Mbeki. American activists can't not confront Bush. The COSATU leaders, the SACP, are happy to fight imperialism everywhere except here at home. It's been good to demonstrate against world summit meetings in Seattle, Genoa, even Doha, but there are problems with following the global elite around—it's not something poor people can afford to do. What if they hold their next conference on the moon? Only millionaire activists will be able to go there.

The point is, we have to build where we are. We have had workshops on the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and we've got strong people working

on those issues. We've set up structures for the Campaign Against Neoliberalism in Southern Africa. But in the end we had to get down to the most basic questions: what are the problems facing people on the ground that unite us most? In Soweto, it's electricity. In another area, it is water. We've learned that you have to actually organize—to talk to people, door to door; to connect with the masses. But you have to build with a vision. From Day One we argued that electricity cuts are the result of privatization. Privatization is the result of GEAR. GEAR reflects the demands of global capital, which the ANC are bent on pushing through. We cannot finally win this immediate struggle unless we win that greater one. But still, connecting with what touches people on a daily basis, in a direct fashion, is the way to move history forward.

Previous texts in this series have been Subcomandante Marcos, 'The Punch Card and the Hourglass' (NLR 9); Naomi Klein, 'Reclaiming the Commons' (NLR 9); John Sellers, 'Raising a Ruckus' (NLR 10); José Bové, 'A Farmers' International?' (NLR 12); David Graeber, 'The New Anarchists' (NLR 13); Michael Hardt, 'Today's Bandung?' (NLR 14); João Pedro Stedile, 'Landless Battalions' (NLR 15); Walden Bello, 'Pacific Panopticon' (NLR 16); Emir Sader, 'Beyond Civil Society' (NLR 17); Tom Mertes, 'Grass-Roots Globalism' (NLR 17); Immanuel Wallerstein, 'New Revolts Against the System' (NLR 18); Bernard Cassen, 'On The Attack' (NLR 19); Chittaroopa Palit, 'Monsoon Risings' (NLR 21).