

THE WATER CASE VICTORY LESSONS TO STRENGTHEN OUR STRUGGLE

On 30 April 2008 the working class of South Africa scored a major victory against the ANC government's capitalist policy of privatization. Judge Moroa Tsoka of the High Court ruled that pre-paid water meters are unlawful and unconstitutional in the Phiri water case.

This was a major blow against the ANC government's drive to install pre-paid water meters and a boost for the struggle for water for all. The victory does not only belong to the Phiri residents but to all working class people in the world who need free water.

The SG congratulates the people of Phiri who suffered and struggled against the water pre-paid meter, in particular, the late Comrade Lindiwe Mazibuko who was the first applicant in the case. She died a few days after hearing about the victory. We also remember the important role played by the late Comrade Bongani Lubisi, SG member and Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) organizer. The Coalition Against Water Privatisation and the APF also helped to win the court case. We must also thank people locally and internationally who contributed to the victory in various ways.

SELF-CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE WATER VICTORY

Marx wrote in his book "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" that revolutionary movements must:

Criticize themselves all the time, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, criticize with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies and weaknesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their enemy only in order that (s)he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, and they back off again and again from the extra-ordinary greatness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible.

The water case victory was a case of victory being snatched from the jaws of defeat. The struggle against water pre-paid meters was defeated in Phiri when Johannesburg Water (JW) managed to successfully install the meters despite the resistance. After finishing in Phiri the installation project moved to other townships in Soweto. We can learn something from this victory in defeat.

The "statue" tactic: A political shortcut

Most people had pre-paid meters installed in their homes, including comrades. However, the resistance continued underground with residents secretly bypassing the meters. This tactic was called the "statue". The meter stood useless like a statue while the water flowed under the ground. This Phiri tactic later spread to other areas in Soweto and some APF leaders agreed with it and even promoted it.

But the SECC opposed this tactic saying that while it robbed JW of income it gave the authorities political capital. It allowed JW to claim that the people agreed to the meters and some criminals were stealing the water. The Johannesburg City Council passed by-laws to punish with stiff fines people found "tampering" with the meters.

The SECC position was based on its experience with electricity. The SECC managed through using the correct tactics to turn illegal connections from a petty crime into a highly politicized defiance campaign for free electricity for all.

The tactic of the statue weakened the struggle because it was short cut born of weakness not strength.

Repression & enemy tricks

The government responded with repression and political manipulation to the struggle in Phiri. Its tactics were largely successful against the resistance.

Some of the tactics used by the government included hiring an armed security company, mobilizing the police, hiring informers and infiltrators, putting huge billboards in the township promoting pre-paid meters, running a school competition in support of the meters, buying a weekly hour-long slot on the community radio station Jozi FM to spread its propaganda, etc. The most effective method was to close off whole blocks of houses and not allow anyone to come in or out and then install the meters by force. Also, many people were arrested, for example, Phiri resident Comrade Mashiya was convicted and sentenced to 2 years in jail with an option of a R25 000 fine for removing a meter in his own yard.

The government and JW won the battle in this manner. The lesson is that the enemy will stop at nothing to make profits and to crush resistance.

Division and confusion in the movement

Some comrades defied till the bitter end. Others stopped resisting. Why? We must accept that we are not equally strong or committed. But in Phiri some of the weakness was caused by wrong decisions by the APF leadership. The struggle in Phiri was isolated and individualized by some leaders who tried to separate Phiri from the SECC. Phiri is a branch of the SECC. This division can be traced to hostility to the SECC and the SG which, among other things, led to the split and the birth of the Soweto Concerned Residents (SCR), also an APF affiliate. These divisive moves led to confusion and accountability problems in the Phiri struggle. These problems exist today. The SCR is still divided among itself.

The SG condemns this short-sighted politics of division. It divides the movement and breeds opportunism, individualism and an inward-looking politics. Comrades, we can only win when we pull all together. To pull together we need to be decent to each other. The real goal of socialism is to make people to treat each other and to be treated decently, with respect and dignity.

SG says: We must not allow the court victory to shift our struggle away from mass action. We must continue to destroy the meter and not fall into bourgeois legalism.

We must celebrate the court victory but not allow the celebration to hide our mistakes and weaknesses. The struggle for socialism must continue. END