

South Africans Are Fighting For Crumbs: A Conversation With Trade Union Leader Irvin Jim



Zoe Alexandra & Vijay Prashad - Photo: Twitter

In mid-December, the African National Congress (ANC) held its national conference where South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa was [reelected](#) as leader of his party, which means that he will lead the ANC into the 2024 general elections. A few delegates at the Johannesburg Expo Center in Nasrec, Gauteng—where the party conference was held—shouted at Ramaphosa asking him to resign because of a scandal called [Farmgate](#) (Ramaphosa [survived](#) a parliamentary vote against his impeachment following the scandal).

Irvin Jim, the general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa ([NUMSA](#)), told us that his country “is sitting on a tinderbox.” A series of crises are wracking South Africa presently: an unemployment crisis, an electricity crisis, and a crisis of xenophobia. The context behind the ANC national conference is stark. “The situation is brutal and harsh,” Irvin Jim said. “The social illness that people experience each day is terrible. The rate of crime has become very high. The gender-based violence experienced by women is very high. The statistics show us that basically people are fighting for crumbs.”

At the ANC conference, five of the top seven posts—from the president to treasurer general—[went](#) to Ramaphosa’s supporters. With the Ramaphosa team in place, and with Ramaphosa himself to be the presidential candidate in 2024, it is

unlikely that the ANC will propose dramatic changes to its policy orientation or provide a new outlook for the country's future to the South African people. The ANC has governed the country for almost 30 years beginning in 1994 after apartheid ended, and the party has won a commanding [62.65](#) percent of the total vote share since then before the 2014 general elections. In the last general election in 2019, Ramaphosa [won](#) with 57.5 percent of the vote, still ahead of any of its opponents. This grip on electoral power has created a sense of complacency in the upper ranks of the ANC. However, at the grassroots, there is anxiety. In the municipal elections of 2021, the ANC support fell [below 50 percent](#) for the first time. A national opinion poll in August 2022 [showed](#) that the ANC would get 42 percent of the vote in the 2024 elections if they were held then.

Negotiated Settlement

Irvin Jim is no stranger to the ANC. Born in South Africa's Eastern Cape in 1968, Jim threw himself into the anti-apartheid movement as a young man. Forced by poverty to leave his education, he worked at Firestone Tire in Port Elizabeth. In 1991, Jim became a NUMSA union shop steward. As part of the communist movement and the ANC, Jim observed that the new government led by former South African President Nelson Mandela agreed to a "negotiated settlement" with the old apartheid elite. This "settlement," Irvin Jim argued, "left intact the structure of white monopoly capital," which included their private ownership of the country's minerals and energy as well as finance. The South African Reserve Bank committed itself, he told us, "to protect the value of white wealth." In the new South Africa, he said, "Africans can go to the beach. They can take their children to the school of their choice. They can choose where to live. But access to these rights is determined by their economic position in society. If you have no access to economic power, then you have none of these liberties."

In 1996, the ANC did make changes to the economic structure, but without harming the "negotiated settlement." The policy known as [GEAR](#) (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution) created growth for the owners of wealth, but [failed](#) to create a long-term process of employment and redistribution. Due to the ANC's failure to address the problem of unemployment—[catastrophically](#) the unemployment rate was 63.9 percent during the first quarter of 2022 for those between the ages of 15 and 24—the social distress being faced by South Africans has further been aggravated. The ANC, Irvin Jim said, "has exposed the country to serious vulnerability."

Solidarity Not Hate

Even if the ANC wins less than 50 percent of the vote in the next general elections, it will still be able to form a government since no other party will attract even comparable support (in the 2019 elections, the Democratic Alliance won merely [20.77 percent](#) of the vote). Irvin Jim told us that there is a need for progressive forces in South Africa to fight and “revisit the negotiated settlement” and create a new policy outline for South Africa. The 2013 [National Development Plan 2030](#) is a pale shadow of the kind of policy required to define South Africa’s future. “It barely talked about jobs,” Jim said. “The only jobs it talked about were window office cleaning and hairdressing. There was no drive to champion manufacturing and industrialization.”

A new program—which would revitalize the freedom agenda in South Africa—must seek “economic power alongside political power,” said Jim. This means that “there is a genuine need to take ownership and control of all the commanding heights of the economy.” South Africa’s non-energy mineral reserves are [estimated](#) to be worth \$2.4 trillion to \$3 trillion. The country is the world’s [largest](#) producer of chrome, manganese, platinum, vanadium, and vermiculite, as well as [one of the largest](#) producers of gold, iron ore, and uranium. How a country with so much wealth can be so poor is answered by the lack of public control South Africa has over its metals and minerals. “South Africa needs to take public ownership of these minerals and metals, develop the processing of these through industrialization, and provide the benefits to the marginalized, landless, and dispossessed South Africans, most of whom are Black,” said Jim.

No program like this will be taken seriously if the working class and the urban poor remain fragmented and powerless. Jim told us that his union—NUMSA—is working with others to link “shop floor struggles with community struggles,” the “employed with the unemployed,” and are building an atmosphere of “solidarity rather than the spirit of hate.” The answers for South Africa will have to come from these struggles, says the veteran trade union leader. “The people,” he said, “have to lead the leaders.”

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