



PRESS ALERT

15 APRIL 2022

GIWUSA condemns government and carbon polluters for causing the climate crisis that killed hundreds in KZN

Hundreds of people – mostly black and working-class – are dead, and billions of rands damage was done this week, as a result of simple failures of climate adaptation in Durban and surrounding municipalities. As a union with nearly 10% of our members working hard in the country's third-largest city, we are aggrieved and demand transformative change.

How can this calamity have happened? The Durban municipality is praised for climate change adaptation, and its Climate Action Report is advertised as the first in Africa by any city. South Africa's national government and electricity company Eskom were seen in such a favourable light at the Glasgow UN Climate Summit in 2021 – a decade after Durban hosted the same event – that R131 billion in “concessional finance” (unspecified) was committed.

But the truth is out for all to see. The city, provincial and national governments have not only been climate slackers but also corrupt in too many areas of service delivery. That means we cannot rely upon our state to carry out simple tasks - such as supporting residents with decent housing, stormwater drainage maintenance and emergency response systems, including access to helicopters which could have saved some of those who otherwise perished.

For more than two decades, municipal leadership in Durban and across KZN have ignored the crucial need to build state capacity in construction and civil engineering, and to hire more public works employees – not as outsourced but as insourced labour – so as to lower unemployment and climate-proof our city.

As Covid-19 hit and jobs were wiped out – more than 100 000 in Durban alone – this is where a Build Back Better strategy was urgently needed. But between the city's post-apartheid mayors (Obedi Mlaba 1996–2011, James Nxumalo 2011–2016, Zandile Gumede 2016–2019, and Mxolisi Kaunda since 2019), there has been minimal consciousness and caring.

The closest we have seen to real delivery was of more than 20 000 RDP houses built during the late 2000s, but on closer inspection it appears that many of these were so poorly constructed that they fell apart under torrential rain pressure this week. Contractors like Shaun Mpisane and Jay Singh had gone unpunished for building most of the skorokoro-type housing, because they were major contributors to ruling-party coffers.

Instead, the city put its money into vanity projects like the R4.3 billion Moses Mabhida Stadium which was barely used for the soccer World Cup in 2010 - or since - and which costs tens of millions of rands in upkeep each year. The stadium across the street used for rugby could easily have been renovated for soccer, by all accounts.

Also in 2010, a network of city, provincial and national elites built an unnecessary new airport in La Mercy, 40km north of the city, costing more than R6 billion. Irrationally, it shifted economic activity and elite housing to the north coast, resegregating Durban by class.

The belief that Durban's deindustrialising economy would be saved by international sports tourism, no matter how neo-colonial (remember Sepp Blatter), permeated the city's investment plans. So even more subsidies have flowed to try dressing up Umhlanga Rocks, the Golden Mile beachfront and the Point.

We appreciate working-class access to the promenade and North Beach, because they are the most democratic spaces in the country, used by residents from all walks of life, including our members. But somewhere along the way, the municipal politicians, city bureaucrats and leading businesses lost the plot.

With Transnet, they entertained fantasies of spending R250 billion on the South Durban airport-to-port conversion, a non-starter opposed by local community activists. The petro-chemical industry was never modernised, as proven when the two oil refineries – Engen and Shell/BP (Sapref) – closing over the last 15 months because their owners didn't want to repair or upgrade them to 21st century standards. We join local activists in demanding a "detox" of that area and urgent conversion of the higher elevations at the old airport site into affordable housing and labour-intensive economic activity.

But it is that type of ANC money-grubbing mentality that we see as causing the loss of life and storm damage. We agree with many in the labour movement and communities that the primary strategy must be to replace the ANC regime – which only got 42% of Durban voters' support last November – with a genuine people's government. Last Sunday, by electing as chair of the ANC in Durban the controversial former mayor Zandile Gumede – who in 2019 was arrested and charged with 2000 acts of corruption – the party's delegates have put the nail in the party's coffin.

Gumede was exemplary only in Durban Solid Waste procurement fraud and municipal greenwashing. After the Glebeland Hostels roof blew off in October 2017 (in the first of the three Rain Bombs to hit since the 1987 flood), she ignored it. Then in April 2019 when a record 168 millimeters fell on Durban in one day, killing 64 municipal residents, she failed to ensure compensation to those who suffered municipal adaptation failure. Only R90 million was delivered for housing relief in mid-2019, though the city's own estimate was R663 million in damage to human settlements. Gumede's crucial leadership of Durban in the late 2010s during two Rain Bombs set the tone for this week's failures.

The problems precede her rule, and include a devious World Bank scheme at Bisasar Road landfill meant to "privatise the air" by burning methane from organic waste in Swiss-sourced turbines. By all accounts it was a failure, but allowed former Mayor Obed Mlaba (who served 1996-2011) to move in with a get-rich-quick of incinerating the waste, a terrible environmental process. His other mistake was in hijacking a R3 billion tender by another entrepreneur, for which he should have been prosecuted but merely had to flee his subsequent job – as SA High Commissioner to Britain – in shame in 2017.

Mlaba oversaw the 2011 Durban hosting of the United Nations COP17 climate summit, one where protesters were illegally suppressed – requiring courts to overturn City Manager Mike Sutcliffe's banning - and that was declared to be a "significant success for the United States," as WikiLeaks records from Hillary Clinton's emails show: <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/24887>

But it was also a success for the high-polluting companies from the West – or for that matter China or South Africa – which were allowed, over the past decade, to destroy our planet, quite possibly beyond hope of repair. Thinking absolutely nothing of poor people, Africans and future generations, the firms sought to maximise profit or in some cases to expand parastatal corporate reach, or in the case of the top 10% of the world's citizens who over-pollute, continue their addiction to an unsustainable lifestyle.

All the while, the politicians and bureaucrats in Durban ignored imminent threats, even when in 2017 more than 100mm of rain fell, or in 2019 168mm fell, in each case doing massive damage and killing innocent residents. The city's mafia-like construction companies and corrupt politicians and officials have spent this period building crummy houses that quickly fall apart, failing to undergird homes with strong foundations, choosing untenable hillsides for housing placement, and diverting funds – but as the Mpisane and Singh empires showed, no matter how corrupt, the municipality would always give them new contracts.

To add insult to injury, Gumede won vice-chair status of U.S. media baron Michael Bloomberg's "C40 Cities Climate Leadership" network just as widely-rumoured procurement-scam charges were being prepared. And then a WWF "One Planet City Challenge" gave her a 2018 award as "a leader in climate action" thanks to Durban's combination of "ambitious targets and focused action with community development initiatives." These irrational mainstream climate recognitions reflect how out of touch the global climate elite are, with what was happening in Durban.

Nationally, we are also disgusted with political elites, because President Cyril Ramaphosa came to Durban this week where he postured: "This disaster is part of climate change. It is telling us that climate change is serious, it is here. We no longer can postpone what we need to do, and the measures we need to take to deal with climate change."

But Ramaphosa had spent the early 2010s getting rich from coal mining. He was deputy chair of the National Development Plan which was committed to "opening up the Waterberg for coal mining (and) a new heavy-haul rail corridor to the Waterberg coal field (with expanded) export capacity in the line to Richards Bay." The NDP also aimed to find "coal seam and shale gas reserves" so "gas-to-power projects should be fast-tracked (and) incorporate a greater share of gas in the energy mix, both through importing liquefied natural gas and if reserves prove commercial, using shale gas."

This is the trajectory that led to highly-controversial marine seismic blasting and much greater reliance on fossil fuels in the energy sector's Integrated Resource Plans. Ramaphosa's fossil addiction also pulled us into the Mozambican "Blood Methane" conflict with Islamic insurgents, where our SANDF troops are defending Total, ExxonMobil and China National Petroleum Corporation in a hellish war zone.

We therefore reject Ramaphosa's NDP and the Eskom "Just Energy Transition" for which 44% of funding will go to methane gas even though it is a far more damaging greenhouse gas than CO₂.

The South African working class is desperate, due to the state's economic mismanagement and the capitalist investment strike. We need immediate emergency relief in KZN's disaster zone. But beyond that we need changes in the structure of power and in public policy.

We demand a serious Just Transition that will mean many more jobs for so many of our members and for a society whose livelihoods must decarbonise even more rapidly than the economy as a whole. To repair the damage done and rebuild Durban so it can withstand extreme weather will cost billions – and it is vital we embark upon this task with maximum commitment to permanent job creation, especially within the state so that the era of procurement scandals, outsourcing and corrupt Public Private Partnerships comes to a decisive end.

And although we are firmly convinced that the South African ruling class and ruling party will reject this strategy, our members stand by in Durban and across the country to make a genuine Just Transition happen. We need to be able to tell future generations that the destructive mayhem of the climate catastrophe, the ruling party's degeneration, the state's repeated failures, and the capitalist system's lethal threat to us all, can be replaced by eco-socialism.

Let's emphasise the need to build a powerful working class led, mass climate Justice movement to take seize political and economic power-through a nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy into a democratic public ownership, control and management to develop the organise the industry to meet the needs of the working class people for jobs, housing, quality public education and health services, in a more ecologically sustainable basis based on renewable energy especially abundant solar and wind power and vast reserves of minerals that can be beneficiated to equip generation, transmission and distribution of this energy to all.

Issued by GIWUSA. For further information, contact:

GIWUSA

John Appolis
GIWUSA General Secretary
071 623 5996

Mametlwe Sebei
GIWUSA President
081 368 0706