

South Africa: 'Return to the Freedom Charter!' -- NUMSA leader Irvin Jim's Ruth First Memorial Lecture



Nelson Mandela with fellow accused Ruth First (centre) and Congress of Democrats supporter Rose Schlachte during the Treason Trial, which began in 1957.

“The revolutionary task of the moment: building democratic organs of the working class, trade unions, the civic movement and a revolutionary socialist vanguard party to defeat South African colonial and racist capitalism.” -- Irvin Jim.

August 14, 2014 -- [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) -- Irvin Jim, general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), presented the 12th annual Ruth First Memorial Lecture at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, in memory of the revolutionary activist who was assassinated by the apartheid regime in 1982.

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May I simply say: Ladies and gentlemen, comrades and friends gathered at this 12th Ruth First Memorial Lecture.

Please allow me to thank the University of the Witwatersrand for taking a very brave and big risk: inviting a humble, unlettered leader of a black trade union to give the 12th Ruth First Memorial Lecture.

We thank you, very much.

As you all must know, the majority of the South African working class, who are black and largely African have historically been denied the opportunity to access quality education, from birth to death. We know that by 2011, only 4% of African and 4% of the Coloured population were enrolled at tertiary institutions as opposed to 15% of Asians or Indians and 20% of the White population in South Africa.

We must keep in mind, throughout this Lecture, that according to Statistics South Africa's mid-year population estimates, of the approximately 53 million or so South Africans, a crude classification says 80% are Africans, 9% are whites, 9% are Coloured and 2% are Indians/Asians!

Our Ruth First: A female Marxist revolutionary

Ruth First, the courageous White woman, an unapologetically a consistent Marxist revolutionary and educator, an anti-racist warrior, an educator among the black and African people of this country whose life we honour today, was assassinated in Mozambique, on August 17, 1982, by a parcel bomb delivered by the apartheid government when she was in an African university teaching young African students the art and science of social research in order to advance the struggle for a socialist Mozambique.



Irvin Jim.

Comrade Ruth First was born into a Marxist family, in 1925. Her parents Tilly and Julius First were Jewish immigrants from Latvia.

Comrade Ruth First died a Marxist.

I will return again and again, to this fact: that Comrade Ruth First was a Marxist who was assassinated by the apartheid government for being a Marxist and a committed member of the South African liberation movement through her direct membership of the South African Communist Party of South Africa (SACP), her work in the Congress of Democrats, which was a branch of the Congress Alliance comprising the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Congress and the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

Comrade Ruth First was savagely killed for her belief in, and struggle for, a just, non-racial, democratic and socialist South Africa.

A socialist South Africa, as far as Ruth First was concerned, was the surest way to end the racist colonial capitalist society that troubled and tortured all her people in general and the African population in particular.

As a Marxist, Ruth First understood very well the interrelatedness, the dialectical connectedness, of racial and capitalist oppression and exploitation in the South Africa. Correctly she chose to fight both, simultaneously.

For her, ending racial and gender oppression and national domination was not enough. In South Africa, she correctly understood racial and national domination to be directly connected to capitalist economic exploitation of the working class in general, and the black and African working class in particular. Which is why she was simultaneously a leader in the Communist

Party of South Africa and an activist and member of the anti-racist national democratic movement.

She directly organised and mobilised her fellow White compatriots into the Congress of Democrats. Comrade Ruth First, a female White Marxist, perfectly understood the necessity to fight simultaneously racial, patriarchal, national and class oppression, domination and exploitation.

We cannot imagine the hatred against Ruth First and her comrades, by colonial, racist and capitalist White South Africa. They were a crop of white revolutionaries who chose to fight with the struggling oppressed, dominated and exploited black and African working class. They chose the side of the people. Comrade Ruth First was a courageous woman. For her courage, passion for a just and socialist South Africa in which there would be no racial, gender and national oppression, domination and class exploitation, she paid the highest price.

I want us to suffer with Ruth First today. I want us to see, feel, hear, smell, touch and sense in all its totality the brutal and violent environment in which she lived. I want us to feel the fear with her. I want us to know the terror she everyday lived with, in all her adult life. I want us to understand that, though Ruth First was assassinated through a parcel bomb, her ideals and the values were not parcel bombed. Her ideals and values still live on in the hearts and minds of the working class.

Ruth First was a courageous Marxist!

Ruth First and her Vision for South Africa: The *Freedom Charter*

I want us then, to ask the all-important question: we who are South African today – white, Indian/Asian, Coloured and African, male and female, young and old, working class and property owners – living in a far safer and less threatening environment, why are we so cowardly, so devoid of any vision of justice, so apathetic to the conditions of the majority of South Africans 20 years after 1994?

What will it take to wake us up from our slumber and stop the rot, the suffering of millions of South Africans from unemployment and poverty, the dying of many of our children at the hands of rapists and gun-toting criminals, the pangs of hunger that are experienced by millions of badly sheltered and unsheltered South Africans?

I ask, in this University, which gave Ruth First her sociology degree, what will it take for us all to open our eyes and see that we are on the precipice, on the edge of a cliff, unless we do something now and big to resolve the question of racial, national and class oppression and exploitation which has intensified in South Africa since 1994?

From where shall today's Ruth First come from? I will return to this question when dealing with the role of universities in the struggle for social justice.

We are meeting here tonight in the very university in which she got her bachelor's degree in sociology in 1946. She, together with her generation of South African revolutionaries in the mid-1950s, participated in the drafting of the *Freedom Charter* – the blueprint then and now, for the first phase of our true journey towards a just, democratic and socialist South Africa.

What was this vision, contained in the *Freedom Charter*? To what extent is South Africa on track towards realising this vision? In short, is the National Democratic Revolution on track?

Allow me to briefly go through main headlines of the *Freedom Charter* to demonstrate the problem that the black working class, particularly the metalworkers, have been consistently raising, before our Special National Congress and after.

The *Freedom Charter* says:

The People Shall Govern!

I argue that the people are not governing. How many of you have been called to your local community meetings to decide on the priorities of your local government? Do you all know what infrastructure projects will be undertaken in the next six months in your neighbourhoods?

Year in year out, the minister of finance announces budgets, and is nominally consulting the people after the announcement. If we are not actively participating in determining budget priorities at the local level, then what informs the national budget?

These basic observations explain the crisis of governance, as reflected by the frequency of service delivery protests. According to an official South African Police Service report obtained by *News24* investigators, there were more than 3000 service delivery protests between 2009 and 2012. This means that there are three service delivery protests every day or 62 service delivery protests a month.

The Multi-Level Government Initiative states that these grievances by communities related, among other issues, to broken promises and government officials ignoring protesters' grievances.

All National Groups Shall have Equal Rights!

How far have we gone in this regard? Substantively, South African society is structurally incapable of delivering equal rights to all national groups. The system of colonialism, which continues to this day, was based on defining national groups on the basis of race. And so, it came to pass, that Africans remained at the bottom of the food chain.

As we speak today, the vast majority of Africans remain at the bottom. The hierarchy of domination: Africans at the bottom, Coloureds next, Indians near the top and then whites at the apex, is still the order of the day.

Is not a fact that those workers that were killed in Marikana were all Africans fighting for a living wage, while the white workers took the side of imperialism?

There cannot be equality of national groups in colonialism!

The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!

Nalena abayifuni! There is complete refusal to share the country's wealth! Some said it will happen over their dead bodies.

In 1994, the Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality stood at 0.64 but it increased to 0.72 in 2006, now stands at 0.69.

Who owns the mines, banks, and monopoly industries in South Africa? The big banks, such as ABSA and Standard Bank, which were erected on the basis of super-exploitation of black workers, are still privately owned and foreign owned. All South African mortgage owners are bonded to imperialism.

There is no mineral in this country that is not dominated by direct foreign ownership and foreign control. Gold, platinum, iron-ore, chrome-ore, manganese-ore are all manipulated by foreign imperialist interests.

Monopoly industries are also foreign owned in the main. SASOL, Arcelor-Mittal; Telkom was sold to foreign private interests and has since failed to pursue a developmental agenda for South Africa. Forestry sectors, the sugar producers and many others are all dominated by foreign interests, and they loot the country through import parity pricing and transfer pricing.

The Land Shall be Shared Among Those Who Work It!

Estimates are that black people own between 13—16% of agricultural land in South Africa. Only 10% of the 30% land earmarked for land restitution has been transferred to black farmers, the target date for the 30% is 2014. At this pace, it will take 100 years to transfer 50% percent of the land back to the people.

The catastrophic effects of the 1913 Land Act, whose centenary passed without any significant national discussion, are still palpable to this day.

The farmworkers' strike for a living wage in 2013 was the only rallying cry that reminded us forcefully about the land question, which should be at the heart of any national liberation struggle. The strike is still fresh in our memories. It continues to highlight the colonial historical

fact that the land, and the produce that comes from it, are not being equitably shared among those who work the land.

All Shall be Equal Before the Law!

How can this be, in a colonial society? As I have argued above, there can be no equality among national groups in a colonial setting. By implication, there can be no equality before the law in a colonial setting.

How many members of the working class, who are in jail today, were afforded an opportunity to have their psychological status examined, with a team of high-powered attorneys, before they can be sentenced?

In short, though we can be told that we are all equal before the law, the problem of wealth concentration by the few shows itself up as lack of access to the very same law, lack of access to justice.

In other words, my point is that equality before the law is too high a standard to be achieved by South African society, as long as the wealth still resides with a minority, be they white or black.

There Shall be Work and Security!

In the past 20 years, there has been no work! In 1995 the unemployment rate was 31%, in 2013 it had risen to 34%. Though the government states it has created a number of jobs, it does not take into account the growth of the labour force! So there is no good story to tell on unemployment.

Even the jobs that have been created do not offer security to workers! In fact there has been growing casualisation and labour market deregulation over the past 20 years.

Now, there is an open Thatcherism in public policy, where organised workers are called "insiders" who are blocking you "outsiders" from getting jobs. In other words, the sin committed by the black working class is to have created trade unions and demanding a living wage in a country where the income gap between ordinary workers and CEOs is 1728 times.

In South Africa's labour market, we have the following facts:

- The Unemployment Insurance Fund does not cover 43% of workers and amongst women, 49% are not covered by the UIF.
- 24% of workers work for more than 48 hours a week, average working time is 44 hours a week. Generally workers are overworked, and the *Freedom Charter* calls for a 40-hour week!
- There is no national minimum wage. Sectoral minimum wages are widely violated, workers were paid on average, 35% less than the legislated sectoral minimum wage (a total of R16 billion, in 2010).
- Only 32% of all those who work have medical aid benefits.
- 43% of workers have no access to paid maternity/paternity leave.
- 31% had no access to paid sick leave.
- 50% of workers have no access to a pension or retirement fund.
- 33% of workers do not have access to paid annual leave.

In short, there is no work and security as promised in the *Freedom Charter*. Judging by the high levels of Thatcherism that are contained in the National Development Plan, these statistics will be worse towards 2030.

The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!

The *Freedom Charter* says the education system must teach young people to love their country. I must also add that the education system must teach young people to stand for social justice, to be on the side of the oppressed all the time.

Indeed, a good number of revolutionary changes were sparked by young people, and sustained and ultimately led by the working class. That is why as NUMSA, we have maintained that, in this country, it is important to build a solid axis between the working class, the revolutionary intelligentsia and the militant youth.

Look at the state of education today:

- It is estimated only 3% of the children who enter the schooling system eventually complete with higher grade mathematics.
- 24% of learners finish schooling in record time.
- The pass rate in African schools is 43%, while the pass rate in white schools is 97%.

How do you discover and nurture talent, as advocated by the *Freedom Charter*, under the following conditions?

- 42% of schools depend on boreholes, rainwater or have no access to water on or near site.
- 61% of schools have no arrangement for disposal of sewage.
- 21% of schools have no toilets on site or have more than 50 learners per toilet.
- Of those with toilets 36% depend on pit latrines.
- 16% have no source of electricity on or near site.
- 41% of schools have no fencing or fences in poor condition.
- 93% of schools have no libraries or libraries are not stocked.
- 88% of schools have no laboratories, or laboratories are not stocked.
- 81% of schools have no computers or more than 100 learners share a computer.

As NUMSA we are not surprised by these developments. In colonialism, the education system is a colonial education system. It is African children who are made to bear the brunt of falling into pit latrines.

But then, I know that at university level, the socio-economic conditions faced by black and white students remain unequal. Black students take longer to complete, they are victims of exclusions,

victimised in the awarding of marks, they do not get adequate support to pursue higher studies, they are not supported to build a cadre of future black and African academics, etc. The South African Students Congress (SASCO) on different campuses is still in the trenches, fighting for what we know is correct. Today, 20 years into colonial democracy:

- In universities, the professors are still white.
- The key administrators who make decisions are white.
- The curriculum is tied to the needs of imperialist domination and the capitalist class. Socialist literature, particularly Marxist-Leninist theory and research, is suppressed and students are discouraged to pursue research in socialist theory.
- Community service is not instilled in the student body as part of the curriculum.
- Access and success in certain fields is still predominantly white.
- There is no free higher education, judging by what SASCO is articulating.
- Workers are given no opportunities to further their studies, or to study. How many workers, who are employed in this University of Ruth First at least, are given an opportunity to build their education base?

All Shall Enjoy Equal Human Rights!

It is a pipedream to think that “human rights” can be enjoyed in colonialism of a special type. As long as the key socio-economic demands of the *Freedom Charter* are not met, there can be no human rights. “Equal human rights” is the standard that is too high to be achieved by colonial South Africa.

There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!

There is no security and comfort in the houses of the working class! Talking about human rights, how can we imagine enjoyment of human rights in a shack that leaks every time there is rain, catches fire every winter because there is no access to basic energy!

Here are some of the facts:

- Average household size is 3.4 people, but is roughly five for African households.
- Among Africans 55% live in dwellings with less than three rooms and 21% live in one-room dwellings.
- Overcrowding and squalid conditions of existence for the working class are similar to the ones described by Karl Marx in Chapter 25 of *Capital* volume 1.
- Small houses, wrongly called RDP [Reconstruction and Development Plan] houses, are built and they are not consistent with household size of the working class.
- Conflict among the working-class communities for access to houses reflects continuing land hunger in urban areas. The black working class even fights among itself along racial lines, as is the case in Cape Town, for housing.

- The quality of public housing is also very poor. In 2010, 50,000 houses had to be demolished and rebuilt because of poor construction.

There is no security and comfort in the houses of the working class. There is no dignity in a shack, be it made of zinc or brick.

There Shall be Peace and Friendship!

At this point, it must be clear to all of us that South Africa is off track. The National Democratic Revolution is off track.

So I argue that there cannot be peace and friendship, as long as the demands that are in the *Freedom Charter* are not being realised. You see this lack of peace in the road rage, in the violent crimes against women and children, in xenophobic and homophobic violent acts. You also see it in the violence by the South African colonial capitalist state against mass protest action.

This country was founded on violence, and the *Freedom Charter* points the way towards peace and friendship.

Freedom Charter

I ask this gathering in Ruth First's university, how many of us here today actually have read, and thought seriously about, the *Freedom Charter*?

I am quite willing to bet that many in this audience have never even bothered to find out what exactly the *Freedom Charter* is, let alone read it.

Go home tonight, get a copy from the internet – there are many good copies posted on the internet – read it, think about it and ask yourself: what is wrong with the *Freedom Charter*?

I promise you, you will find absolutely nothing wrong with the *Freedom Charter* and everything good about it: it is our blueprint towards making the first real steps towards a sane South Africa, a South Africa well on its way to resolve the race, gender, national and class oppression and exploitation that threatens to destroy the entire country today.

Your ignorance of the *Freedom Charter* will be your undoing! It is no longer a banned document. Read it, think about it and discuss it. Allow students to freely research about it, do not suppress them. Go on, do it!

Ruth First, and her revolutionary friends of all races, worked tirelessly to gather the freedom demands of all the people of goodwill of South Africa and to concentrate them into the *Freedom Charter*. Thus, to use Mao Tse Tung's terminology, the *Freedom Charter* is from the masses, and is to the masses. It is our MASS LINE!

Ruth First was killed for the *Freedom Charter*! Yet today, we are told that the *Freedom Charter* was influenced by the social-democratic fashion of the 1950s. Others even say the *Freedom Charter* is now irrelevant.

Did Ruth First, and many others, die for fashion. Are their deaths irrelevant?

Ruth First was a very brave journalist. She understood that the role of a journalist in history is to record the truth as it is, which is why she combined journalism with research, with writing and documenting the stories of struggles against injustice.

Ruth First was not a gutter, sensational journalist eager to please her paymasters. She used journalism as a trade in the service of the struggle for just South Africa.

The South African Revolution and Ruth First

What is the South African capitalist state? We quote from the South African Communist Party literature (SACP), from a time when the party could spend real time on theory, from a document called *Path to Power*, written in 1989:

The South African capitalist state did not emerge as a result of an internal popular anti-feudal revolution. It was imposed from above and from without. From its birth through to the present, South African capitalism has depended heavily on the imperialist centres.

Capital from Europe financed the opening of the mines. It was the colonial state that provided the resources to build the basic infrastructure - railways, roads, harbours, posts and telegraphs. It was an imperial army of occupation that created the conditions for political unification. And it was within a colonial setting that the emerging South African capitalist class entrenched and extended the racially exclusive system to increase its opportunities for profit. The racial division of labour, the battery of racist laws and political exclusiveness guaranteed this. From these origins a pattern of domination, which arose in the period of external colonialism, was carried over into the newly-formed Union of South Africa. From its origins to the present, this form of domination has been maintained under changing conditions and by varying mechanisms. In all essential respects, however, the colonial status of the black majority has remained in place. Therefore we characterise our society as colonialism of a special type."

We learn here that:

- The South African capitalist state was not a result of popular internal anti-feudal revolution, it was imposed from without.
- South African capitalism from its origins has depended heavily on imperialist centres.
- An imperial army of occupation created the conditions for unification of South Africa.
- Within a colonial setting, the emerging capitalist class entrenched and extended the racially exclusive system to increase its opportunities for profit.
- Racial division of labour, a battery of racist laws and political exclusive guaranteed super profits.
- The newly formed Union of South Africa simply continued the racial and colonial domination which had arisen during the period of external colonialism.
- Under changing conditions and using varying mechanisms, the original racial and colonial domination has been maintained.
- Throughout its history, the South African capitalist state has maintained the colonial status of the black majority.

Comrade Ruth First understood the struggle for freedom in South Africa as one aimed at overthrowing this state of affairs, if need be, through armed struggle. For this, she suffered terribly, including being the first white woman to be detained under the abominable 90 Days Detention Act, in August 1963.

As already stated, for Comrade Ruth First and the struggle for a truly just South Africa, inevitably involved abolishing racial and colonial domination, and simultaneously ending class exploitation. She clearly understood that neither the racial, gender, national nor class question could be independently resolved. Only those well schooled in the Marxist method could understand and practice this.

Comrade Ruth First was a Marxist strategist of note.

The struggle for national democracy and the consequences of its having been abandoned

No amount of nursing, squeezing and teasing of South African social and economic statistics over the past 20 years of our so called democracy can conceal the most obvious fact: the colonial status of the vast majority of South Africans remains the same, white monopoly capital is well and sound, and imperialist presence has deepened!

Inequalities, unemployment and poverty have all worsened in real terms post-1994, with well over 26 million South Africans today classified as very poor, while 25 million of these are Africans.

We have seen the disintegration and dissolution of the once mighty liberation movement. Today, there is general looting of the country and its people by imperialism, White monopoly capital and the black and African elites.

Almost a third of the South African populations need the miserable social grants to barely stay alive!

The unity between white monopoly capitalism, the black comprador capitalist class and sections of the petit-bourgeoisie is facilitated by their common interest to continue extracting surplus value from black labour.

The failure of the national liberation movement to stick to its program, the *Freedom Charter*, means that the super-exploitation of black workers by white monopoly capital is maintained. Now in order for the black comprador and sections of the black petit-bourgeoisie to accumulate, they have to further intensify the exploitation of black workers to get their piece.

Thus, certain operations in companies such as Telkom, Transnet and Eskom are outsourced, to these black capitalists, which puts workers in more vulnerable position of exploitation. Social and economic miseries dehumanise our working-class population – drugs, guns, rape, and all sorts of violence are the daily companions of the working class.

The rich, however, have erected their own maximum prisons behind their gated suburbs and over electrified barricades – all in an effort to prevent the violence their greed has actually created in the country. Sadly, they do not always succeed.

The wholesale abandonment of the struggle for national democratic freedom has eroded any revolutionary morality, solidarity and concern for what might hold us together as a people – we have descended, barely in 20 years, into a nation in despair.

Our mission, our revolutionary tasks today!

The working class in all its racial, gender, national, age and other criteria is the everlasting opposite class of the capitalist class. Employed and unemployed, urban or rural, this mass of teeming labourers stand in constant opposition to the capitalist class.

This class is not always aware of itself as a class, as the most direct product, in our circumstances, of the racist colonial capitalist system. In a million and one ways, this class is everyday involved in a life and death fight with the capitalist class.

In South Africa today, the majority of the South African class who are class conscious are fast realising that the liberation movement has run its course, has expired. It is time to advance the cause for socialism.

We in NUMSA resolved, last year in December, to take unprecedented decisions including campaigning for COSATU to break with the ANC-led alliance.

We are embarked on the most difficult journey – to unite the working class and people of South Africa behind Ruth First's dream, the dream of a socialist South Africa.

We are determined that we shall not idly sit by and watch our lives, our resources, our collective futures and our Earth and country get destroyed by the money mongers – both local and foreign.

We have been promised many big things. Now, there are attempts to replace the *Freedom Charter* of Ruth First with its polar opposite, the National Development Plan (NDP). Our view is that this plan is predicated on super-exploitation of black workers, and maintenance of the colonial and capitalist power relations that define South African society.

As such, the NDP is not a working-class plan, and it will fail to meet even its own mediocre targets. Besides, we have shown as NUMSA that this NDP is a cut and paste from Democratic Alliance policies. So far, no one has disputed our assertion with facts. It is therefore not surprising that the ANC leadership is implementing a DA policy, because to us as NUMSA, they belong to the same class.

We should also remind ourselves that this National Development Plan is not the first one to come from both the ANC and the DA. How many of you remember Vision 2014, which was drafted in 2004, to halve poverty, unemployment and inequality by 2014. Almost everything that the ANC promised in Vision 2014 has failed to be achieved. We have already done a thorough analysis of Vision 2014 as NUMSA. And now they have another vision, Vision 2030!

We are determined to forge ahead with the struggle for a socialist South Africa. White monopoly capitalism has failed us, as it should. To us, only socialism offers the best solution to South Africa's, Africa's and the world's problems.

As the real producers of wealth, we, the workers, know we shall not fail. We ask you to join us, to forge a happy, peaceful, free and just future, for all of us. But let us not harbour illusions, to achieve this, we have to unleash a consistent class struggle, whose immediate program is the Freedom Charter, the yardstick that we use to gauge how free we are.

We all have a democratic and revolutionary responsibility to build democratic working-class organs including trade unions, to build a vibrant democratic civic movement, to work towards a socialist South Africa!

No army can win a war without organisation, discipline and resolute leadership. The history of the Roman army bears this out. Outnumbered, the Roman battalions, could win wars against armies that were more than three times their number. Why? Because of discipline in battle, proper thought on strategy and tactics, and resolute leadership.

In South Africa today, the working class has the numbers, but it does not have the proper organisation. That is why I argue that the most immediate task of any revolutionary in South Africa today, is to build the revolutionary organisations of the working class.

Most of all, trade union organisations must be united in a militant fighting federation. Civic organisations must be co-ordinated into a working-class-led United Front. All the various struggles in various fronts that the working class undertakes, must be welded together into a common struggle by an unashamedly socialist vanguard party.

The alternative is too dark to venture into!

Ruth First and her virtues, her enduring legacy

In Ruth First and her death, we honour all the women of courage, of intellect, who teach, research and write about socialism. We honour all the women freedom fighters who paid the ultimate price, who sacrificed a life of false White bliss for the struggle for a truly free South Africa.

Comrade Ruth First was truly an African, she was one of us.

On behalf of the toiling masses, I thank you!

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