

STEERING COMMITTEE BRIEFING DOCUMENT

# The Conference of the Left

Background, Political Rationale and the Question of Participation

**Prepared for: Trade unions and other working class organisations, Political Parties, Social and civic organisations and for the attention of the media**

**Reference framework:** Conference of the Left Framework Document

## 1. Purpose of this Brief

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1. This brief is prepared by the steering committee of the Conference of The Left for the attention of the leadership and membership of South African Trade Unions, civic organisations, participating political formations and the public at large. Its purpose is to set out, fully and frankly, the background to the Conference of the Left, the political reasoning that has produced it, the class character of the moment in which it is convened, and the question of trade union's participation.
2. It is offered as a working document among comrades, interested parties and in the interest of public clarity. It does not pre-empt any decision properly belonging to any organisation or trade union. The trade unions and trade union federations are sovereign formations that will determine their own posture through their own democratic processes. What follows is intended to inform that determination, not to substitute for it.
3. The brief proceeds in five areas: the conjuncture and the class character of the moment; the political rationale for convening the broadest left; what the Conference is and, equally important, what it is not; the programme and the practical shape of participation.

## 2. The Class Character of the Moment

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### **We meet at a moment of deepening crisis for the working class and the poor.**

The crisis is not episodic. It is structural. Mass unemployment has hardened into a permanent feature of the social landscape. The cost of living continues to outrun wages. Public services strain under the weight of austerity, while the commanding heights of the economy remain in private hands and oriented toward private accumulation. The conditions of the working class have not improved in proportion to the political freedoms won in 1994. This contradiction is the defining feature of our conjuncture.

The balance of forces has shifted against the organised working class. Capital has reorganised itself globally and locally, fragmenting the workforce, expanding precarious and informal work, and weakening the institutions through which workers have historically defended themselves. The trade union movement confronts declining density, employer offensives, and the structural transformation of the world of work itself. These are not the difficulties of one federation or one union. They are the shared conditions of labour as a class.

At the same time, the political terrain has fragmented. The forces that consider themselves part of the left are dispersed across parties, movements, federations, community formations, and campaigns. They are frequently divided, sometimes not by principle but often by history, personality, and the absence of any standing forum in which to reason together. Capital is organised. Labour is divided. This asymmetry is the central strategic problem the Conference is intended to address.

*The working class cannot defend itself in fragments. The first task of the moment is to recompose the unity of the working class and its allies, on a principled basis, around a common programme of struggle.*

### 3. Why a Conference of the Left, and Why Now

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4. The case for convening the broadest left rests on a simple proposition. The forces that stand objectively on the side of the working class are far stronger together than apart, and at present they have no forum in which to act together. The Conference exists to begin building that forum.
5. Lenin observed that the strength of the working class lies in organisation, and that without organisation the proletariat is nothing, while organised it is everything. The principle holds beyond the single party. The wider movement of the left is similarly nothing while dispersed and potentially decisive when coordinated. The Conference is an exercise in organisation at the level of the class and its allies.
6. This is not a call for the dissolution of existing formations into one another. Each formation, each union, each federation, each party, each movement, retains its own identity, its own mandate, and its own discipline. What is proposed is coordination, not absorption. A united front of the left does not require that its components surrender their autonomy. It requires that they identify what they hold in common and act upon it.
7. The timing is not arbitrary. The assault on the social wage, expressed sharply in the contest over the National Health Insurance and the defence of public provision, demands a coordinated response. The structural transformation of work, including the rise of the gig and platform economy, presents the labour movement with challenges no single union can meet alone. The moment demands that the left reason together about strategy and tactics, and that it does so now rather than after the next setback.
8. Two further fronts of this assault must be named, for they define the terrain on which the coming period will be fought. The first is the drive to privatise the network industries. Electricity, rail, ports and logistics, telecommunications, and water are being unbundled and opened to private capital. These are not ordinary commodities. They are the strategic infrastructure on which the whole economy, the social wage, and the daily life of the working class depend. To surrender them to private accumulation is to place the levers of the economy, and the conditions of working-class existence, in the hands of those whose interest is profit rather than provision. The defence of public ownership of the network industries is therefore a defence of the material basis of the social wage itself.
9. The second is the dominance of financial capital over the productive economy. Investment, production, and employment are increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of financial accumulation and the demand for shareholder returns. Capital that ought to flow into building, manufacturing, and the creation of work is instead directed toward speculation and the extraction of value from existing assets. The result is an economy that enriches the holders of financial wealth while starving the productive base of the resources and the jobs the working class requires. The struggle to subordinate finance to the needs of production, and production to the needs of the people is among the central economic questions before the left.

*The question before the left is not whether unity is desirable. It is whether we will build it deliberately, or continue to pay the price of its absence.*

## 4. What the Conference Is, and What It Is Not

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Precisely because the Conference touches on the unity of the left, it is essential to be exact about its character. Misunderstanding on this point would do more harm than good. The following distinctions are offered in that spirit.

### 4.1 What the Conference is

- A working forum in which formations of the left reason together about the conjuncture, the balance of forces, and the strategy and tactics appropriate to the moment.
- A space for identifying common ground and constructing a common programme of struggle on the basis of that common ground.
- A standing process, not a single event. The intention is to establish ongoing coordination among participating formations, including thematic working groups and a coordinating structure.
- An inclusive process, open to the genuine forces of the left across parties, trade unions, community formations, social movements, and the progressive intelligentsia.

### 4.2 What the Conference is not

- It is not a new political party, nor the embryo of one. It does not seek to contest elections in its own name or to displace any existing formation.
- It is not a takeover of the left by any single party, including the SACP. The SACP has taken the initiative to convene, but convening is not commanding. The Conference belongs to its participants.
- It is not a substitute for the Alliance, nor an instrument directed against it. The Alliance and its reconfiguration are matters for the Alliance partners to determine through their own established processes. The Conference operates on a different and wider terrain.
- It is not a forum that requires any participant to surrender its autonomy, its mandate, or its organisational independence as a condition of participation.

*No formation is asked to choose between its existing commitments and the work of the Left. Participation is additional to, not in place of, the obligations each formation already carries.*

## 5. The Programme and Shape of the Conference

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The Conference is structured as a two-day working gathering. The first day is given over to political context, framework discussion, and thematic inputs, organised around parallel commissions. The second day consolidates the work of the commissions into resolutions, a Declaration, and an agreed way forward.

The substantive work is carried by three commissions, each grounded in the Conference Framework Document. These are organised as follows.

<b>Commission</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Framework grounding</b>
<b>Commission A</b>	Political Economy and Global Context	Framework Sections 2 and 4
<b>Commission B</b>	Balance of Forces, Struggles and Strategy	Framework Sections 3 and 5
<b>Commission C</b>	Economic Transformation, Environment and Left Structures	Framework Sections 6 and 7

The closing plenary receives the commission reports, debates and adopts a Conference Declaration, and resolves the way forward. The way forward is expected to include the establishment of a coordinating structure, the adoption of thematic working groups — including a dedicated group on the informal economy, the gig economy, and new forms of work under the control of those who labour — and the adoption of a joint campaign and immediate priority agenda.

The Framework Document has been developed through successive iterations and circulated to participating formations. It carries the political economy of the conjuncture, the analysis of the balance of forces, the strategic and tactical orientation, and the priority areas of work, including the structural theme of safety and security. It is the common reference point for all commissions and is available to all participating organisations on request.

### **5.1 The breadth of participation**

The Conference convenes a wide range of formations of the left. The confirmed participants span political parties and formations, trade unions, community and civic structures, and internationally affiliated bodies of the workers’ movement. The composition reflects the inclusive character of the process: it reaches beyond any single tradition on the left while holding to a principled basis of participation.

It is precisely the breadth of this gathering that makes the participation of organised labour important. The Conference would be incomplete as a forum of the left without the considered voice of the trade union movement, which carries the direct experience of the workplace, the shop floor, and the daily defence of working-class living standards.

## **6. Conclusion**

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The crisis confronting the working class is deep, and it is shared. No single formation, no party, no federation, no movement, can meet it alone. The Conference of the Left is an attempt to give organised form to what the working class and its allies already hold in common, without asking any of them to be less than they are.

The SACP has taken the initiative to convene. It does not seek to lead by command, but to serve the process of recomposing the unity of the left. That unity cannot be declared. It must be built, deliberately and patiently, by formations that retain their own identities while learning again to act together.