

# CONFERENCE OF THE LEFT

*Building a Left Movement for Working-Class and Popular Power*

## **Draft Framework for the Conference of the Left**

Version 5 |

*Issued by the Steering Committee of the Conference of the Left*

## 1. Purpose

This framework provides the political basis for the Conference of the Left. It is grounded in the material conditions confronting the working class and popular strata under South African capitalism, and in the strategic tasks that flow from that reality.

Its purpose is not dialogue for its own sake. It is the active strengthening of organised social power capable of confronting, challenging, and ultimately defeating racial, patriarchal, and class domination embedded in the current economic order.

**Transformation is not delivered. It is won through organised struggle.**

This document does not propose the formation of a new political party. It does not impose ideological uniformity. It is a working framework, open to refinement, designed to enable coordinated action among diverse Left formations across traditions, generations, and organisational forms.

The South African Left is historically plural. That diversity must not become a source of fragmentation. It must become a basis for unity in struggle. The objective is not agreement on everything. It is convergence around the decisive questions: ownership, power, and structural transformation.

This conference is a collective process. It does not belong to any single organisation and must not be reduced to one. Its authority derives from the breadth and depth of Left and popular forces that own it.

## 2. Summary

South Africa is in crisis. It is a structural crisis rooted in the inherent contradictions and limitations of capitalist accumulation in a society shaped by history racial and gender oppression, and deepening class inequality.

Inequality is severe and worsening. The cost of living has become intolerable for the working class and for large sections of the population who were supposed to benefit from the democratic transition. Real wages have declined. Household debt, including student debt, has risen. Access to food, energy, transport, and housing becomes more precarious with every year.

The gains of 1994 were real. They must be defended. Expanded access to social provision, political rights, and basic services represented genuine advances. But without structural transformation of ownership and productive capacity, those gains remain vulnerable and reversible. Capital did not accept defeat in 1994. It adjusted, restructured, and reasserted its dominance.

**Economic policy is no longer shaped primarily by social need. It is shaped by the demands of the capitalist class, particularly financial capital.**

At the same time, reactionary and right-wing forces are advancing. They exploit insecurity and rage, but they redirect popular anger away from its true sources: the concentrated power of capital, the failure of ownership to change, and the subordination of the state to financial interests. Reactionary politics is not an alternative to the current crisis. It is capitalism's political expression in a period of deepening crisis.

This crisis cannot be resolved through incremental adjustment. It requires organised confrontation with the structures of economic power, and the rebuilding of a Left capable of leading that confrontation.

### 3. Introduction: A moment of crisis and strategic choice

South Africa stands at a decisive conjuncture. The choices made in the next period will determine the direction of struggle for a generation.

The democratic breakthrough of 1994 dismantled the formal institutions of racial domination. It extended political rights, opened representative institutions, and initiated a period of social provision that improved the material conditions of millions. That achievement must not be dismissed or diminished.

But it did not dismantle the economic foundations of inequality. Ownership remained concentrated in the same hands. Productive capacity remained oriented toward extraction and export. Finance capital retained its grip on investment and macroeconomic policy.

#### **Political democracy without economic power is real but incomplete.**

For millions of working-class and poor South Africans, democracy has not translated into material transformation. This is not a failure of aspiration. It is the structural consequence of a society in which the means of producing wealth, the direction of investment, and the accumulation of wealth remain organised around profit rather than human need.

The result is growing disillusionment, declining political participation, and deepening fragmentation. Electoral withdrawal among working-class communities is not apathy. It is rational. When formal politics does not change material conditions, people stop believing in it. Into this vacuum, reactionary forces have moved. They speak in the language of grievance but serve the interests of power. The rise of reactionary politics in South Africa is the political expression of unresolved social contradictions - and it will deepen unless the Left intervenes with a compelling counter-project grounded in the material interests of the working class.

The choice is stark: either the Left organises and leads, or the crisis deepens and reaction advances.

#### **Discussion:**

*What forms of organisation and struggle are required to confront the deepening crisis in practical terms?*

*What prevents the Left from acting as a unified social force, and how do we overcome those barriers in practice?*

### 4. South Africa in the global structure of capital: Africa, imperialism and resistance

South Africa's crisis cannot be understood in isolation. It is embedded in a global system of capitalist accumulation and imperialist domination that shapes what is possible within the country's borders.

Across Africa, economies were integrated into global capitalism as suppliers of raw materials and reservoirs of cheap labour. Colonial rule institutionalised this subordination. Political independence did not dismantle it. In most cases, primary commodity dependence persisted, industrialisation remained shallow, and economies became structurally vulnerable to external debt, financial volatility, and the conditionalities of global financial institutions.

#### **The extraction of African wealth continues. Its forms have changed. Its logic has not.**

The Sahel region is in flames. Sudan is engulfed in war. The Democratic Republic of Congo bleeds for its minerals. These are not random tragedies or failures of governance. They are the violent expression of an imperialist scramble for resources, influence, and strategic control in a

continent that global capital has always regarded as a site of extraction rather than human development.

Sanctions, financial coercion, and direct military intervention remain the tools of imperialist power. Cuba's decades-long endurance under economic blockade is a testament to revolutionary determination, but also a demonstration of the lengths to which dominant powers will go to crush any project of sovereign development that challenges their interests. Venezuela's experience is the same. Palestine's dispossession and the daily violence of occupation is the starkest contemporary expression of imperialism's logic.

**Solidarity with Cuba, Venezuela, and Palestine is a political commitment rooted in a shared struggle against the same system of imperial domination.**

South Africa itself is not outside this system. Its accumulation model remains anchored in mineral extraction and the export of primary commodities. High-value manufactured goods, advanced inputs, and technological capacity are imported. Financial flows reinforce external dependency. The rand is vulnerable to speculative attacks. Monetary policy is shaped more by the requirements of global capital than by the employment and development needs of the South African working class.

A Left strategy that does not confront imperialism - that accepts the global economic order as a given within which we merely seek better terms - is not a Left strategy. It is a negotiation from weakness.

Internationalism must be active. It must be built through working-class and popular cooperation across borders, through material solidarity, and through shared struggle against the common structures of capitalist and imperialist domination.

**Discussion:**

*How should the South African Left deepen its practical solidarity with liberation struggles on the African continent?*

*What would a genuinely anti-imperialist economic policy look like in the South African context?*

## **5. The Balance of Forces**

We must be clear-eyed about the current balance of forces. It does not favour the working class. That assessment is not pessimism. It is the starting point for strategy.

**Capital holds the commanding heights. The Left is fragmented. The moment is urgent.**

Neoliberal economic frameworks dominate state policy. Fiscal discipline, inflation targeting, investor confidence, and financial stability have become the primary language of governance. Within this framework, employment creation, redistribution, and social development are not priorities. They are subordinated to the imperatives of capital mobility and financial markets. This is not simply a consequence of bad policy or bad leadership. It is the structural power of capital asserting itself. When financial capital is dominant in the economy and when ownership is concentrated, the policy space available to democratic institutions is narrowed. Not eliminated, but narrowed. And capital uses its structural class power to narrow it further.

Neo-liberal political forces operate within this framework. They prioritise institutional stability and market confidence. They manage inequality without confronting the structures that produce it. They offer competence in the service of the existing order.

Reactionary forces exploit the rage that this order generates. They name false enemies. They redirect legitimate anger against migrants, institutions, and scapegoats. They protect the system

while attacking its visible symptoms. Their politics is dangerous precisely because it speaks to real suffering.

**Both neoliberalism and reaction serve the same system. They differ in method, not in whose interests they protect.**

This is occurring alongside a serious weakening of organised working-class power. Deindustrialisation has fragmented traditional centres of labour organisation. Informalisation and precarious work have eroded collective bargaining capacity. Youth unemployment has created a generation structurally excluded from the formal economy and from the political traditions of the organised Left. Community organisations face resource pressure and political marginalisation.

Political education has weakened.

Without deliberate, organised intervention, this imbalance will deepen. The outcome is not foreordained. But the trajectory, without effective Left response, is clear: continued concentration of wealth and power, continued erosion of democratic capacity, and the advance of reactionary alternatives.

**The question is not whether crisis exists. The question is who shapes its resolution.**

**Discussion:** *What is the most important thing Left forces must do in the next twelve months to shift the balance of forces?*

*Where are the points of leverage? Who are the natural allies we are not yet working with?*

## **6. The Promise and limits of 1994**

April 1994 was a historic victory. It must be understood as such. The dismantling of formal apartheid, the extension of universal suffrage, the establishment of representative institutions, and the expansion of social provision were the products of sustained mass struggle. Millions of South Africans gained rights, services, and recognition that had been violently denied for generations. Those gains are real. They are worth defending.

But a sober accounting of three decades since April 1994 demands honesty: political democratisation was not accompanied by economic transformation. The economic power that apartheid concentrated was not redistributed. It was retained, restructured, and in some respects deepened.

**The most important economic structures of apartheid were preserved. They were simply no longer formally racial.**

Ownership in finance, mining, energy, retail, and land remained highly concentrated. Financialisation deepened, directing investment toward short-term financial returns rather than productive expansion. Deindustrialisation advanced. Employment creation lagged far behind population growth. Inequality widened in absolute terms even as a new black middle strata and a small black capitalist stratum emerged.

### **The crisis of work**

Unemployment is the defining feature of the social landscape. Structural unemployment, not cyclical. A condition rooted in the organisation of the economy, not in the inadequacy of individuals. The expanded definition of unemployment captures more than half of young people in South Africa. That is not a statistic. It is the daily lived reality of a generation.

Informal and precarious work has expanded. Outsourcing, casualisation, and sub-contracting have eroded stable employment and collective bargaining. For millions of households, survival

depends on a combination of unstable wages, social grants, informal activity, and debt. The social grant system is essential. But it is a safety net, not a floor of economic participation.

Women carry a disproportionate share of this burden. Unpaid care work, precarious income, and the social consequences of unemployment fall most heavily on women. The crisis of work is inseparable from the structure of gender relations.

### The cost of living as a terrain of struggle

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Rising food prices, electricity tariffs, transport costs, and housing expenses have compressed real wages and eroded household reproduction. The cost of living is not merely an economic statistic. It is a political terrain. It is where the working class experiences the consequences of macroeconomic policy in their most immediate and tangible form.

The cost of living crisis is also a climate story. Energy insecurity, drought, flooding, and infrastructure damage impose additional and compounding pressures. If the transition to low-carbon energy is managed through market mechanisms alone, it will deepen inequality. It must instead be linked to public investment, employment creation, and energy sovereignty.

### The structural task

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The unfinished character of 1994 reflects the limits of a political settlement that left economic power intact. Addressing it requires confronting that power directly: democratising ownership, directing investment toward social need, expanding public control over key sectors, and building forms of economic organisation rooted in the collective interests of the working class.

Extending the promise of 1994 means extending democratic power into economic life: into ownership, production, and the allocation of resources.

#### Discussion:

*What are the most important sites of economic power that must be confronted or transformed?*

*What would a meaningful programme of economic democratisation look like in the South African context today?*

## 7. Revolutionary politics and organised power

Transformation does not arrive through moral pressure, parliamentary manoeuvre, or goodwill. It is won through organised power.

### Revolutionary politics begins from this recognition and never abandons it.

This does not mean the parliamentary arena is irrelevant. It is not. It does not mean that policy and legal reform are unimportant. They are important. But it does mean that the terrain of struggle is not in committee rooms or legislative chambers alone. It is equally in workplaces, communities, streets, and the organised formations of the working class.

Revolutionary politics is the politics of building and exercising collective power from the ground. It is built through:

- organisation in workplaces, communities, and the sites of social reproduction where the working class actually lives
- political education that exposes the realities of capitalism, names the enemy clearly, and builds strategic clarity across generations
- linking immediate and material struggles to the structural transformation they demand

- building durable forms of collective ownership and democratic control over production, land, and resources
- forging unity across the organised and unorganised working class, across formal and informal employment, across generations and genders

The Left in South Africa must be honest about what it has lost and what it must rebuild. Organisation has weakened. Political education has declined. The connection between everyday struggle and structural politics has frayed. The leadership culture in too many formations reproduces the extractive tendencies of the system we claim to oppose.

Renewal cannot succeed if it reproduces the weaknesses of what it seeks to overcome. Ethical leadership, internal democracy, and accountability to membership are not secondary concerns. They are strategic necessities.

Revolutionary politics in the South African context must be grounded in the specific history and material conditions of the country: the legacy of racial dispossession, the weight of patriarchal social relations, the depth of spatial inequality, the particular forms of capitalist accumulation that structure the economy. Abstract formulas will not serve. Concrete analysis, concrete organisation, and concrete struggle will.

Revolutionary politics is ultimately about making the impossible possible. Every transformation that the ruling class declared impossible - the defeat of colonialism, the dismantling of apartheid regime - became possible through organised struggle. The task of the Left is not to accept the limits the powerful set for us. It is to organise until those limits break.

#### Discussion:

*How do we rebuild a culture of political education within Left organisations?*

*What forms of revolutionary politics are relevant to the conditions of informal workers, unemployed youth, and community-based movements who are outside the traditional structures of the organised Left?*

## 8. Strategic orientation: With, against, and beyond the state

The state is not neutral. It is a terrain of class struggle, shaped by the balance of forces between capital and labour, between the ruling class and the organised working class. Its character, its policies, and its possibilities are determined in significant part by which social forces dominate its direction.

Left forces must therefore engage the state on three fronts simultaneously and without confusion between them.

### With the state

Where the state can be directed toward redistribution, public investment, industrial expansion, and the protection of working-class interests, Left forces must fight to make it do so. The pressure of organised social forces on state institutions is a legitimate and necessary form of struggle. Public ownership, developmental planning, expanded social provision, and progressive taxation are not concessions from capital. They are the product of organised working-class power asserting itself through the state.

## Against the state

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Where the state enforces austerity, enables dispossession, criminalises protest, or serves the interests of capital against those of the working class, Left forces must oppose it. This includes the macroeconomic framework that subordinates employment to financial stability, the use of security forces against community and worker struggles, and the procurement systems that redirect public resources to private accumulation. No genuflection to the state as a neutral arbiter is permissible when it functions as an instrument of class power against the working class.

## Beyond the state

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Transformation cannot be delivered from above or through the state alone. The most durable forms of social power are built from the ground, in communities, workplaces, and cooperative formations that give the working class direct control over aspects of their collective lives. Solidarity economy institutions, cooperative enterprises, community-controlled services, and popular organisations that operate independently of state structures are not alternatives to political struggle. They are integral to it.

**The state is a means, not an end. Power held by the working class in its own institutions is the foundation on which a transformed state can be built.**

### Discussion:

*How do Left forces prevent their engagement with the state from becoming incorporation into the state's logic?*

*What does independent popular power look like in practice in communities and workplaces today?*

## 9. Strategic priorities and campaign focus

A framework that does not connect to real struggles is not a framework. It is a declaration. The Left must identify the concrete terrains where organised confrontation with capitalist power can build momentum, demonstrate collective efficacy, and shift material conditions for working-class communities. Underlying and connecting all of these terrains is the pivotal question of property relations: the ownership of the commanding heights of the economy, and the specific forms of intervention through which that ownership is challenged and transformed. These are the strategic priorities for the immediate period.

### Property relations and the ownership of the commanding heights

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The question of who owns the commanding heights of the South African economy is not one strategic priority among others. It is the foundational question from which all others flow. This framework has already named the diagnosis: political democracy without economic power remains incomplete; the failure of ownership to change is a defining feature of the post-1994 crisis; and capital holds the commanding heights. The task of this section is to move from diagnosis to programme.

The subordination of the state to financial interests, the cost-of-living crisis, structural unemployment, the failure of land reform, and the collapse of public services are not separate crises with separate causes. They are integrated consequences of a property structure that has not fundamentally changed since 1994. The means of producing wealth, directing investment, and accumulating surplus remain concentrated in private hands, oriented toward profit rather than social need. A Left strategy that does not directly address this structure is not a transformative strategy. It is crisis management within the existing order.

The Conference of the Left must advance a programme of intervention in property relations through a specific variety of forms, calibrated to different sectors and different political

possibilities, but united by a common direction of travel toward expanded public and social ownership. These forms include:

- **Public ownership** of strategic sectors, including energy, water, steel, infrastructure, and key financial institutions, placed under democratic control and directed toward developmental rather than speculative ends
- **Social ownership**, through the expansion of cooperative enterprises, worker and community-owned productive assets, and solidarity economy institutions that place economic decision-making power in the hands of working-class communities
- **Worker ownership and control** in productive enterprises, including through conversion to worker cooperatives, and through the assertion of democratic rights over investment decisions and the direction of production
- **A radical land reform**, returning land to the people, smallholder, including through expropriation where its dispossession was the direct product of colonial and apartheid accumulation
- **Democratic control of finance**, including through public and development banking directed toward social need, and the regulation of private financial flows to prevent productive investment from being subordinated to speculative returns

These are not aspirations to be deferred until the moment of full political power. They are the immediate terrain of struggle: in municipalities where public assets are contested, in enterprises where workers are fighting for ownership and rights, in communities asserting control over land and resources, and in the legislative and policy arena where the framework governing property relations is contested every day.

The expansion of public and social ownership forms is both a strategic end and an immediate organising task. Every cooperative established, every public asset defended against privatisation, every expropriation demanded, and every financial institution brought under democratic accountability is a material advance in the struggle over property relations. The campaign priorities that follow must be understood in this light.

### **The cost of living as the central organising terrain**

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Rising food prices, electricity tariffs, transport costs, and housing expenses are not abstract policy concerns. They are the lived experience of the working class. They are also the product of specific policy choices, ownership structures, and the subordination of the state to financial and corporate interests. The cost of living crisis connects the material experience of every working-class household to the structural questions the Left must address.

It is therefore the most immediate and broadly accessible terrain for Left organising. A sustained, coordinated campaign linking the daily struggles of working-class households to the ownership of food systems, energy, transport infrastructure, and housing is both strategically necessary and practically achievable.

### **Employment, public investment, and industrial strategy**

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Structural unemployment will not be resolved through small business support or skills programmes. It requires a fundamental reorientation of macroeconomic policy toward employment creation, public investment in labour-intensive productive sectors, and democratic direction of finance capital toward social need rather than speculative returns. This is not a distant aspiration. It is a concrete campaign demand.

### **Land, food sovereignty, and rural struggle**

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The land question remains unresolved and urgent. Land reform that serves working-class and smallholder interests, the building of cooperative and community-controlled food systems, and the reduction of dependence on imported basic food items are immediate practical demands rooted in the daily survival of rural and peri-urban communities.

## Public services and local government accountability

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The failure of municipal services is not merely administrative. It is the political consequence of fiscal austerity, privatisation, and the weakening of public capacity. Community struggles around services, housing, and local development must be connected to the structural causes that produce them, and to campaigns for democratic control over municipal budgets and procurement.

## Climate and the just transition

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The climate crisis is a class crisis. Its consequences fall most heavily on working-class and poor communities. The transition away from fossil fuels, if managed by capital and market mechanisms, will destroy livelihoods without creating alternatives. The Left must insist on a just transition that is worker-led, publicly planned, and oriented toward energy sovereignty and employment creation.

## Safety, security, and organised social power

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Gender-based violence, community insecurity, and the daily reality of organised crime and social disintegration are not marginal concerns. They are the lived experience of the working class in communities whose social fabric has been torn by unemployment, spatial inequality, and the retreat of the state. Safety and security must be understood as a class question and addressed through organised community power, not only through policing.

### Discussion:

*Which of these campaign terrains is most immediately relevant to your organisation's current work?*

*How can the Left build coordination between different campaigns rather than allowing them to become separate and unconnected?*

## 10. Organisational form: Process, coordination, and the Council of the Left

The analysis in this framework demands organisation. Diagnosis without prescription is not strategy. The Conference of the Left must initiate a sustained process of coordination and joint struggle, not a symbolic gathering whose declarations gather dust.

**A conference that ends without durable organisation has failed, regardless of the quality of its discussions.**

The framework proposes the development of a Council of the Left as a coordinating mechanism.

### What the Council is

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The Council of the Left is a coordination platform. Its role is to facilitate joint campaigns, support shared political education, maintain organisational continuity between conferences, and strengthen the collective intervention of Left forces in political and social life. It is not a command structure. It does not issue directives to member organisations. It does not replace existing formations or override their political autonomy.

### What the Council is not

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The Council is not a new political party. It does not contest elections in its own name. It does not seek to dissolve the diversity of Left formations into a single organisation. Unity in action does not require uniformity in programme, ideology, or internal life. The strength of the Council lies in the fact that organisations join it with their full identity intact, and coordinate where interests and priorities converge.

## Accountability and rootedness

The Council must be accountable, transparent, and rooted in working-class and popular formations. Its structures must be controlled by the formations that constitute it, not by a self-appointed leadership. Its resources must be subject to democratic oversight. Its priorities must be set through structured deliberation, not by dominant organisations imposing their agenda on others.

Without accountability, coordination structures become instruments of domination rather than tools of liberation.

The experience of the South African Left provides both positive and negative lessons on this. The Council of the Left must learn from both.

### Discussion:

*What are the concrete minimum conditions for organisations to join and participate in the Council of the Left?*

*What accountability mechanisms would give diverse formations the confidence to coordinate without surrendering their autonomy?*

## 11. Immediate Priorities: First-phase implementation

The Council of the Left must produce results in its first phase of operation. Without visible outputs, coordination will lose credibility and momentum. The following are the priority areas for the first twelve months following the conference.

- Employment and macroeconomic alternatives: a joint campaign and policy platform demanding reorientation of fiscal and monetary policy toward employment creation, public investment, and developmental finance
- Cost of living: a coordinated campaign connecting community struggles over food, energy, transport, and housing to the structural causes of rising prices and the policy alternatives the Left proposes
- Land and food systems: support for smallholder and cooperative production, linked to local food sovereignty campaigns and opposition to land concentration
- Local government accountability: community-based monitoring of service delivery, procurement, and budgets, with a national platform for sharing local experiences and building replicable practices
- Political education: a shared programme of teach-ins, reading groups, and educational campaigns across organisations, linked to the priority struggles and grounded in the analytical framework
- Youth and women's economic participation: campaigns targeting the specific barriers facing young people and women in the labour market and the social economy, linked to skills and cooperative development programmes
- Safety and security as a Left issue: developing a Left framework for community safety that goes beyond policing to address the structural roots of violence and insecurity

Each priority area requires a designated working group with specific formations taking responsibility for coordination, clear timelines, and measurable outcomes. The Council will report publicly on progress against these priorities at defined intervals.

The measure of this conference is not the quality of its Declaration. It is whether the working class and popular formations that participate in it are stronger, more coordinated, and more effective six months and twelve months from now.

## 12. Conclusion: The Conference is a commitment to struggle

This conference is a commitment.

A commitment to honest analysis of the crisis confronting the working class. A commitment to principled coordination across the diversity of the South African Left. A commitment to sustained struggle against the concentrated power of capital and the political forces that serve it. A commitment to building the organised social power without which transformation remains a declaration rather than a practice.

### **The conditions are clear. The urgency is real. The responsibility is collective.**

Capitalist domination does not announce its retreat. It must be confronted, organised against, and progressively dismantled through the sustained exercise of working-class and popular power. That is the work of a generation, not a conference. But the conference must initiate that work, give it direction, and demonstrate that the Left is capable of acting as a coherent force.

The political terrain is dangerous. Reactionary forces are organised and resourced. Finance capital is globally mobile and structurally powerful. The state is contested terrain, not a friendly environment. The Left enters this terrain with the weight of its own internal divisions, its weakened organisation, and its uneven political education.

And yet. The working class is the majority. The crisis of capitalism is deepening. The failure of neoliberal promises is visible to anyone who is paying attention. The conditions for a mass Left politics are present. What is required is the organisation, the discipline, the strategy, and the unity in action to seize them.

The answer to the question of this conjuncture is not written in advance. It will be written by the choices made in the coming months, in the quality of our organisation, and in the clarity of our commitment to the working class and popular forces we serve.

The Conference of the Left begins that work. It does not end it.

**Forward to working-class and popular power.**