

COSATU Input  
Conference of the Left



**COSATU**

## Background to the Conference of the Left

The federation wants to start by welcoming this convening of the Conference of the Left. The conference is a culmination of our joint engagements within the working-class axis of the Alliance, dating back to the joint convening of the Chris Hani Working-class Leadership School in September 2024. From the outcomes of our analysis of the South African revolution, the strategic setback in the NDR, and the reconfiguration of the Alliance, one of the key resolutions of the Political School was the joint convening of the Conference of the Left, to engage in a broad discussion and develop a collective programme of action on working-class anti-neoliberal austerity struggles, and advancing the national democratic revolution.

From the joint political school, COSATU further engaged at its Central Executive Committee, culminating in the 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee declaration, which affirmed the co-convening of the Conference of the Left with the SACP, to coalesce the broadest possible voices of progressive, anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal forces across the country.

The federation, in its conception of what the Conference of the Left is, is framed behind our analysis of the current political situation, first of the international balance of forces, which we argue is characterised by the deepening global capitalist crisis, producing compounded contradictions of heightening militarisation of the global geopolitics and imperialist war mongering, ascendance of fascism (and neofascism) driven by the global North.

Key features of the global capitalist crisis and its manifestation in the US are best exemplified by the decline of the US and its hegemony on the global economy and politics, which has been a feature for the most part of post-World War 1 & 2. The decline of US hegemony is also a result of struggles in various parts of the world, the election of left coalitions in Mexico, Chile, Colombia for instance, the rise of the BRICS mechanism, as well as growing relevance of calls for multipolarity in governance of global political and economic arrangements, away from unipolar frame, through which the US-led West (global North) has asserted hegemony in global political arrangements, economy and culture.

We also see heightened imperialist aggression against the people of the Global South, like the US imperialist attack on Caracas, Venezuela, and the abduction of its President and his wife. We have also witnessed a unilateral sanctions and tariffs regime and its weaponisation, all reflecting the desperation of the US ruling class as a declining hegemon's ultimate obsession for power, the MAGA mantra, and the resurgence of white supremacist, racist, and religious bigotry, in the MAGA movement, apartheid Israel conquest and genocide on Palestine and its people, and the re-formation of white supremacist legitimacy in South Africa.

- Increased violation of UN codes and rules in the militarism and aggression pushed by the US (and apartheid Israel), destabilising the Middle East region, and genocide in Palestine, the US's attack on a sovereign nation and abducting President Maduro, with new threats on Cuba, and the current war on Iran, which is plunging the global economy into a crisis. Capitalist militarism always enriches the bourgeoisie while devastating the global working class, particularly in the global South.

- This military aggression benefits imperialist accumulation by the military industrial complex, accelerating profiteering by arms manufacturers, oil barons, and financial elites. This war and aggression are also producing collateral damage in the Periphery, as disruptions in global supply chains and shipping routes create a devastating ripple effect across the Global South. In our case, the mining and infrastructure industries are severely affected as oil industrial products like bitumen are increasingly in low supply, with both mining and infrastructure companies passing the cost to workers through growing retrenchments.
- Global capitalist crisis is also producing instances of fracturing within the global North, as variable capitalist interests compete, with fractures within EU for instance, as well as growing split between EU and the US administration on Iran, on Israel's genocide on Palestinians, and regarding unilateral tariffs imposed by the Trump administration.

## Our analysis of South Africa's economic crisis, unemployment, and retrenchments

Our view as COSATU is that the key issues in the discussion of the Conference of the Left must engage with what we have all characterised as the crisis of capitalism in South Africa. At our recent CEC, we characterised the South African economy as facing a deep structural crisis, going beyond temporary economic stagnation, but a systemic failure marked by deindustrialisation, fiscal austerity, and an aggressive capitalist restructuring of the workplace. For instance, latest Labour Force Survey figures put unemployment is at the centre of the South African crisis, with the Q1 of 2026 unemployment being at 32,7%, up from 31,4% in Q4 of last year. Expanded unemployment is at a staggering 43,7%, up from 42,1% in Q4 last year. This disproportionately affects the Youth more and is no longer a ticking time bomb but one waiting to explode

We contrast this with false promises at both the SONA and the Budget Speech, which claimed that the economy was rebounding, beginning to produce dividends of 'economic reforms'. On the contrary, Q1 GDP and unemployment numbers point to a persisting economic crisis, now accentuated by global stagflation resulting from the imperialist US/Israeli war on Iran. The Labour Force Survey shows that more than 300 thousand jobs were lost in the first quarter of this year, with growing threats of Section 189 looming for workers in mining, retail, and network sectors of the economy. Large sections of workers in the East Rand (Nigel and Benoni) and in the Vaal (Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark) are on the brink as more than 3500 jobs could be directly lost, and a further 20 000 value-chain jobs that would be lost with the impending closure of Arcelor Mittal smelters.

## Inequality, rising cost of living, and a crisis of social reproduction

- The economic crisis is producing an economy of exclusion, further compounded by a severe cost-of-living crisis that systematically erodes the dignity of working-class households and communities. Working-class households face a persistent rise in food costs and transportation costs, further locking them in permanent indebtedness.

- South Africa's historical spatial inequality reproduces apartheid racial and gendered class inequalities, with high-income urban enclaves coexisting alongside deteriorating townships and rural settlements that have been stripped of productive assets and youth.
- This uneven development has turned local municipalities into zones of crisis rather than development, where the breakdown of public order and infrastructure fuels crime and social fragmentation.
- As a result, the burden of social reproduction—caring for families amidst collapsing health, water, and energy infrastructure—falls disproportionately on women, whose unpaid labour sustains life where public services have failed. The cost of food, water, fuel, electricity, health, and quality education continue to spike, whilst already unaffordable.
- Retrenchments continue to cripple the working class, in an already dire economy. Look at ArcelorMittal, Pick n Pay and other multinational operations in South Africa.
- COSATU is embarking on a Cost of living campaign, as resolved by our CEC, we urge your participation. From June 2026, we will proceed with rolling out a mass action program on this issue.

## Declining confidence in formal political and state institutions

- South Africa's sharpening contradictions emanating from the crisis of social reproduction play out in the moral decay, the high levels of crime and violence, as well as the surging political and protest mobilisation organised behind anti-immigrant, for instance the "*abahambe*" campaigns that are gaining resonance and momentum among sections of working-class communities.
- High levels of violence and criminality mostly affect working-class communities. Also, the scourge of gender-based violence and femicide against women and children, which has turned every location in South Africa, be it workplace, home, leisure parks, etc., into a potential space for violation, abuse, and killing of black women.
- We argue that crime and violence should also be analysed as a factor of growing trust deficit between scores of our people and the government, as well as dissonance of our people with the democratic political project.

## Crisis of Social Reproduction and Fragmentation of Electoral Politics

- 2024 elections, represent more than just the rejection of the ANC, but a much deeper crisis of working-class representation in South African politics, characterised by growing detachment of mostly working-class communities, and the historical black townships and informal settlements from electoral politics and lack of trust in political parties, organised politics, and state formation. For instance, 60% of adults of voting age did not participate in elections. In urban townships, average voter turnout was at a lowly 35%, with SOWETO, Tembisa, KwaThema in Springs, Mamelodi, Katorus, KwaZakhele, etc., averaging 32% voter turnout.

## Rise of populism and political fragmentation: anti-progressive political currency in the public sphere

- Growing political fragmentation in the working class, especially in the progressive politics
- Mushrooming of political and organisational formations, gaining popularity in parts of our communities and through social media networks, mostly representing ‘politics on the margins, largely ignored by organised politics in government and parliament’.
- Genuine concerns that should mobilise working-class communities, the campaigns and protests are mostly mobilised on anti-progressive, right-wing, ethno-nationalist, nationalist, and chauvinist politics and aspirations, for example South Africa’s immigration crisis.
- We argue that South Africa’s economic crises, high unemployment and persisting inequality, even the crisis of social reproduction are the outcome of a political economy construction behind neoliberal austerity, the empowering of profit-making capital over transformation, coupled by a moratorium on investment by both the state in public infrastructure development, investment strike by capital into productive sectors of the economy, producing protracted de-industrialisation over the last 25 to 30 years of democratic governance.
- The decay of the social fabric in working-class communities, the disintegration of solidarity structures, the fragmentation of the left, and organisational weaknesses within the Alliance, which have weakened the ability of progressive forces to effectively respond to the crisis facing workers and poor communities. Instead, we observe the growth of reactionary and neo-fascist politics among sections of the desperate masses..

At this conference, we have to first accurately characterise the crisis, but not just locally, but also be able to locate the crisis of global capitalism and its relationship with the South African crisis.

## What should be the key discussion at the Conference of the Left?

While different formations in this august session come from varying points of departure, first from our conception of ‘left’ politics, to our framing of our individual organisations, as well as electoral contestation among some of the political parties represented here, this conference of the left has key areas of discussion that should ground our engagement, and hopefully coalesce us towards some basic, or minimum programme for building a left or progressive agenda for South Africa.

At the centre of our discussion and key sets of demands, this conference should declare a demand for the government on an ‘anti-neoliberal austerity’ programme.

Coupled with this demand, there should also be a demand against the privatisation of the state, the privatisation of the provision of public services by private-for-profit interests. This should come with a clear rejection of the government’s GAIN strategy. We should coalesce in our rejection of GAIN, which is the latest iteration of the government’s 2019 economic paper

by National Treasury, copied from the World Bank and OECD report on South Africa. This National Treasury paper, although thoroughly rejected by every progressive formation, found its voice in the government's Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan (ERRP) during Covid-19, the Vulindlela Programme from 2022, and presently in the GAIN and ANC's Ten Point Plan. These inform the government's Energy Transition Plan, including its JET-IP, premised on massive expansion of the private sector-led energy generation, privatisation by stealth of the entire network sector of the economy, from ports, rail, road, water services and energy.

The conference of the left must make a demand for acceleration of public investment in public infrastructure and massive investment in re-industrialisation, redevelopment of South African manufacturing, through intensive resource-led industrialisation, anchored in localised value-addition, especially in the critical minerals.

The left project must also include a demand for the expansion of SRD grant towards a full UBIG rollout.

The left project must demand the implementation of NHI and an end to the corruption and the hollowing of the state to private (for-profit) interests.

The left project must demand the expansion of the mandate of the South African Reserve Bank to be anchored on growing the economy and employment creation

The left project must demand transforming the heights of the economy, and socialising the economy

The left project must demand an end to gender-based violence, femicide against women (and children)

The left project must demand protection of workers' gains of freedom, protection of collective bargaining arrangements

## COSATU on the notion of Left

- The Conference must stay away from the seeking of the perfect definition of the Left. We need to take cue from Chris Hanis Definition of Socialism. The Left must adopt a Minimum Programme for the Left away from the professed perfect definition, premised on shared vision of bettering the lives of poor people in our land.
- COSATU confirms its stand and support with the Left as it seeks to achieve Socialism
- COSATUs fight against Austerity, Privatisation, Restructuring, Poor Service Delivery, Retrenchment, poor service delivery, landlessness is common fact for ALL forces of the Left and we will continue to call on all of us to join hands and the front lines on this fight.

**AN INJURY TO ONE, IS AN INJURY TO ALL!**