Forty arrested at Cape Town Occupy

Iqra Qalam
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Forty people were arrested on Friday 26 January as they prepared to launch an Occupy Rondebosch Common demonstration in Cape Town. The three-day "People's Jobs, Land & Housing Summit", organised by community organisations include Passop, Proudly Manenberg, Gugulethu Anti-Eviction Campaign, South African NGO Coalition and the South African Council of Churches, was broken up with brutal police repression.

The mayor of Cape Town, Patricia De Lille, justified the police brutality, declaring in a speech to the City Council: "There are those who would sooner see this city destroyed, driven in two by violence and aggression, than be a part of a shared destiny. I tell this council now, those agents of division will not win."

She said that she would not allow "these agents of destruction to use their misguided, naive and brutal misunderstandings of the politics of race to divide this city."

In the 1980s, Patricia De Lille was a trade union official and rose to the leadership of the Pan African Congress (PAC), a group which had split from the now ruling African National Congress (ANC) in 1959. After leaving the PAC she formed the Independent Democrats (ID) before merging with the right-wing Democratic Alliance.

De Lille unleashed the repression against the peaceful demonstrators for attempting to hold a gathering in Rondebosch Common, which under Apartheid was an area from which non-whites were banned and is today surrounded by wealthy suburbs and golf courses. Her reactionary response was emblematic of the evolution of a whole layer of former advocates of the "liberation struggle" in the ANC and PAC, who have since become ferocious defenders of wealth and privilege.

The Mayor's Communication Department of the City of Cape Town issued a hypocritical statement on January 27 further justifying continued and deepening social inequality as an inevitable feature of "nation building" and defending the imminent crackdown. "Occupations, illegal actions, invasions, these are all side-paths, so much more tempting for those who are weary," it stated. "But they lead nowhere.

"All that remains at the end of these short diversions is more pain, suffering, conflict and violence. And when we descend there, we will forget where we were going, forever."

In reality, however, it was the city administration and the police that violated the law and trampled on the rights of the demonstrators. The brutality was driven in no small measure because many of those protesting had come from poorer townships.

A statement released by those who attempted to peacefully occupy the common pointed out that the police carried out what amounted to the preemptive detention of those they suspected of heading to the demonstration.

"They penned us inside our townships saying we were not welcome in the leafy suburbs," the statement said. Some buses bringing demonstrators to Rondebosch were blocked and re-routed by the police.

"There were police stationed all over Cape Town: in Kraaifontein, all along Klipfontein Rd, in Little Mowbray, and even in Wynberg," the statement added. "There were Caspirs [armoured personnel carriers], SAPS [South Africa's national police force], Water Cannons, Law Enforcement, Anti-Land Invasions units, Metro Police and an unknown number of undercover police."

While thousands of people had tried to go to the protest site, only a few hundred had managed to reach it, staging a peaceful protest at the entrance to the common.

"Using armoured vehicles and police in riot gear, they herded people together in order to arrest them," the statement said. It charged that the police, who had

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removed their nametags before wading into the demonstrators, pepper-sprayed an unresisting elderly man, “smacked” a woman trying to film the operation before taking her into custody and assaulted young women who had joined the protest. Many of the protesters were sprayed with blue dye.

Protesters chanted, “We are the 99 percent”, and “Forward we shall march, to a people’s government” as the police bundled them into the backs of police trucks and vans.

While some residents of the wealthy suburbs adjoining the common had voiced concern that the Occupy protests would harm the fynbos and other plant species there, the police vehicles, including the heavy Casspir armoured cars ended up doing extensive damage to the grounds.

The demonstrators charged that the Anti-Land Invasions unit, which together with other police squads was brought in to quell the demonstration, was particularly brutal. The unit has been previously charged by human rights groups with acting illegally and with excessive force against homeless people who have tried to erect shacks on city lands.

COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) provincial secretary Tony Ehrenreich, who is also head of the ANC-led opposition in the City Council and led the ANC’s election campaign in the Western Cape, said: “Police stopped people at many points and some from boarding trains. But COSATU filed an application on Friday for a protest on the common on Saturday.”

A statement of principles adopted by the demonstrators insists that “political parties and organizations affiliated with political parties are not welcome in our struggle” and that no sympathetic organisation is allowed to dictate policies “COSATU included.” In the absence of a clear independent policy, based on socialism and the independent mobilisation of the working class, however, there is clearly substantial pressure to bring the Cape Town protests under the wing of the ANC, which is carrying out policies indistinguishable from those of De Lille on the national level.

All but one of the 41 demonstrators arrested last Friday were released after spending several hours in police jail cells. Mario Wanza, one of the main organizers of the demonstration, who was personally vilified by Mayor De Lille and arrested in Manenberg before the protest began, was held over the weekend.

Charges against all of those arrested, except for Wanza, were dropped on Monday. Wanza was released on a 500 rand bail and on the condition that he not take part in any “illegal protests”.

“That my charge wasn’t dropped shows victimisation.,” Wanza told the *Cape Argus*. “We are considering [bringing] charges against the mayor for abuse of power,” he said.

A political commentator noted that the Cape Town authorities’ actions were “indicative of the police response to the Occupy phenomenon throughout the world.”

“They have shown how they can keep up with the ‘world class’ standard set in Oakland or New York,” said Christopher McMichael, who is completing a PhD in politics at Rhodes University, centering on the militarisation and “securitisation” of South African society. “The response was based upon a militarised outlook of pre-emption,” he said.

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