

Ruth First Memorial Lecture 2014 – Irvin Jim

Ruth First Lecture

Irvin Jim (Numsa General Secretary)

14th August 2014

Wits University

“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.”

The Vice Chancellor - University of the Witwatersrand,
Staff and students of the Wits Journalism Department,

Esteemed guests at this Lecture,

All lecturers and students present,

Fellow trade unionists,

Media present,

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 odd 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, actually was assassinated in Mozambique, on August 17, in 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!

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 Communist Party of South Africa, her work in the Congress of Democrats which was a branch of the Congress Alliance comprising 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, nonracial, 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 the 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!

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 more safe 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 totting 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.

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

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 realizing 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:

1. 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 neighborhoods?

Year in year out, the Minister of Finance announces budgets, and is nominally consulting 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 3 000 service delivery protests between 2009 and 2012. This means that there are 3 service delivery protests every day or 62 service delivery protests a month.

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

1. 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 at 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!

2. 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, etc., 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