



**ADDRESS BY ANC DEPUTY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA
AT THE ELIJAH BARAYI MEMORIAL LECTURE**

**LEBOGANG SECONDARY SCHOOL, WELKOM
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Comrades,

It is a great honour to be invited to reflect on the life and contribution of Elijah Barayi, a giant of the trade union movement and a stalwart of the liberation struggle.

In his modest, unassuming way, Barayi left an indelible mark on the struggle of workers against oppression and exploitation. From as early as the 1950s, Barayi was a committed activist of the African National Congress. Steeped in the politics and traditions of the liberation movement, he became a vociferous champion of the working class.

It is often said that Barayi was not recruited into the National Union of Mineworkers – he recruited himself. Appalled by the conditions under which mineworkers lived and worked, Barayi started organising in the mines. At the launch of NUM in 1982, Barayi was one of the most vocal delegates.

He was forthright when he spoke, commanding the attention of all present and providing clear direction on the work to be done. It was largely thanks to his skills as an orator, his passionate commitment to improve the plight of workers and his grounding in the politics of the movement that he was elected President of COSATU at its founding in 1985.

From the beginning he made it clear that the struggle of workers in South Africa was a political struggle. To prevail workers needed to confront not only exploitative wages and working conditions but also the tyranny of the apartheid state.

In his speech at the launch of COSATU, he declared:

“To the South African government, I say: your time is over. We do not apologise for being black. We are proud of it. As from today Mandela and all political prisoners should be released. PW Botha, you have failed in your duties to release Mandela.”



Then, departing from his prepared speech, he issued a challenge to the apartheid government that was a defining moment for COSATU and the trade union movement in South Africa. In an act of political defiance, he gave the government an ultimatum to repeal the pass laws within six months or face the consequences.

These unscripted remarks helped to position COSATU as a working class revolutionary trade union federation that believed that the interests of workers did not stop at the factory gate, but extended beyond into the communities where the workers lived. It was these remarks that began to raise the consciousness of many leaders within COSATU unions, and firmly established COSATU as a potent force among the working people of South Africa.

In taking this position Barayi was making a bold and unequivocal statement that the workers of South Africa were prepared to be at the forefront of the struggle for liberation. That was the moment when the workers of this country demonstrated that they refused to be swept along by the currents of history, and that they would take a stand. They declared that they would fight for the future of the country and the freedom of its people.

Comrades, now we find ourselves at another moment when the nation looks to workers to take a firm stand in defence of the freedom of our people and the future of the country.

Through the struggles waged by COSATU and the broader liberation movement, we have swept away the apartheid state and brought into being a democratic dispensation based on the will of the people. Together we have built a better society, raised millions of our people out of abject poverty and created opportunities where before there were none. We have entrenched the rights of workers in the Constitution and enacted several progressive labour laws.

Yet, as the workers of this country know only too well, we have not eradicated the apartheid legacy of inequality, poverty, low skills levels and systemic unemployment. Despite significant progress, there are still millions of working people who do not earn a living wage. Control and ownership of the economy still remains in the hands of a few. Race, gender and class remain as the defining faultlines of our society.

Our ability to confront these challenges is hampered both by an unfavourable global economic environment and by our own weaknesses. As has become increasingly apparent, we are constrained in our efforts to transform society by divisions within the movement and a weakening



of public institutions. We are now aware of a brazen criminal network that has sought to capture key positions within the state, to steal funds that rightfully belong to the people.

In the last few days we have even learnt of an alleged scheme to deprive COSATU of millions of rand. This infiltration of the state and the movement has been made possible by, among other things, our own subjective weaknesses.

We have spoken about the erosion of our organisational capacity, a decline in the political consciousness of our leaders and members, increasing distance from the communities we are meant to serve, and steady corrosion of the values and best traditions of our movement.

Like Elijah Barayi did in 1985, like COSATU has done at critical times in our struggle, this is a moment for workers again to take a stand. This is a moment for workers to take the lead in defence of our revolution and the freedom of our people. We look to COSATU, in particular, to be at the forefront of the struggle against poverty and inequality.

As our economy slides into recession and our sovereign credit rating is downgraded, it is essential that workers drive efforts to build a social compact for growth and jobs. Our country has tremendous economic potential, but we will not realise it unless all social partners work together to increase levels of investment, create new jobs, improve economic output and achieve higher levels of growth.

Without investment, growth and jobs we will not be able to address poverty and inequality and transform the economy. Workers need to be at the forefront of that partnership. They need to make sure that the measures that the social partners put in place achieve growth that is inclusive and create jobs that are decent.

Workers need to take a stand on the concentration of ownership and control in our economy. They need to be part of efforts to ensure not only that the economy is deracialised, but that it is no longer possible for a few big companies to dominate key industries.

Workers must insist that competition authorities be given greater powers to dismantle monopolies and prevent anticompetitive behaviour. Workers must insist that employee share ownership schemes, profit sharing and worker representation on boards become widely accepted mechanisms to promote broad-based black economic empowerment.



Workers must also challenge the dominance of men in the economy.

They need to ensure that women are equally represented, receive equal pay and are not exposed to any form of harassment or discrimination.

It is critical too that organised labour, COSATU in particular, takes a stand against any actions that damage the economy. They need to ensure that all social partners are alert to the fact that the decisions they take can have an adverse effect on economic stability and investor confidence.

When the rand falls, inflation rises, debt grows, ratings are downgraded and the economy contracts, it is the poor who suffer most. It is the membership of COSATU that bears the brunt of ill-considered decisions and reckless behaviour by those in positions of authority. It is the poor and working class who are most affected by state capture and corruption.

Because money is diverted from state-owned enterprises and other public institutions, some may think that these are victimless crimes. They are not. The funds that are taken were meant to meet the needs of the poor. They were meant to build our economic infrastructure, improve our education and health systems, build houses and provide electricity.

When public funds destined for emerging farmers in this province are diverted to pay for a wedding, it is the rural poor who suffer. When large international companies pay kickbacks to secure tenders from parastatals, it is the ordinary people of South Africa who emerge poorer.

In 1985 Elijah Barayi stood up to the apartheid state and said “no more”.

Now is the moment for workers to say to all those who are involved in perpetrating and facilitating these criminal acts – “no more”. This must stop now.

A judicial commission of inquiry must be established without delay to establish the full extent of state capture. Our law enforcement agencies should be working day and night to investigate all these allegations and to bring those responsible to book. Every single rand that has been stolen from the people of South Africa must be recovered.

It is critically important that our people see progress being made in addressing these grave allegations.

Workers need to take a stand against factionalism and division. There is no component of the Alliance that is immune from practices that are divisive and which weaken our ability to serve the interests of the people. Workers need to take the lead in rooting out such tendencies and healing



the divisions within the movement. As the most organised and most revolutionary motive force in the country, workers must take it upon their shoulders to rebuild the movement and the Alliance.

It is a matter of grave concern that a gulf appears to have opened up between the various components of the Alliance. We need to frankly discuss the differences between the formations in the Alliance. We need to get to the causes of the problem and resolve them in a meaningful and lasting way.

As we undertake this critical work, we should draw on the lessons of the life of Elijah Barayi. We remember him as a champion of worker unity.

He believed that only a united working class could effectively challenge exploitation and oppression. We must follow his lead as we seek to build and strengthen COSATU.

The affiliates of COSATU need to dedicate themselves to growing their membership and, specifically, recruiting workers that are not unionised.

They need to effectively represent the interests of their workers and be responsive to their needs. The federation needs to bring other unions closer to it and to work on areas of shared interest and common cause.

Elijah Barayi was disciplined, principled and steadfast. His example should encourage us to uphold and promote the values of the movement. We need to serve the people above all else and demonstrate the kind of commitment and selflessness that was taught to us by Elijah Barayi and his generation.

Barayi was a builder and an organiser. We need to build structures and empower members as the most effective way to renew the movement.

This means tireless, systematic, painstaking organisational work in our structures, on the shop floor, in churches and sports clubs, in community halls and on the streets. We need to locate our structures among our people to ensure that they are responsive and accountable.

Most importantly, we need to give people hope by confronting our challenges and addressing their concerns.

When Elijah Barayi spoke at the launch of COSATU, he announced the awakening of the workers of our country. He gave our people hope and encouragement. He set the progressive trade union movement on a new path of struggle.



Today, as we confront many of the same social and economic challenges, as well as many new political challenges, let us draw inspiration from that moment in our history. Let us stand together in defence of our revolution and the freedom of our people. Let us build a better future – not for some, but for all.

Let us make Elijah Barayi proud.

I thank you.