

Pietermaritzburg waste: Dignity and courage vs barbarism and cowardice.

12 November 2015, Mark Butler.

I was one of a number of middle-class residents of Pietermaritzburg who went to support and witness the protest action of waste-pickers at the city's rubbish dump this week. I do think it is correct to stand in solidarity with their actions but I do not speak on the waste-pickers behalf - they are perfectly clear, public and eloquent and do not need anyone to speak for them.

It should be horrific enough to galvanise us all into immediate action that, in South Africa in 2015 we are so unequal a society that some poor people eke out an existence salvaging scraps from the waste left over from the lives lived by the rest of us. But for those who rule over the state we're in, this problem is apparently something to be resolved through a careful choice of which type of guns are to be used against poor people. Pietermaritzburg's ruling political elite and their managers literally sat in a formal meeting recently proposing and debating the use of pellet guns against waste pickers at the municipal waste dump.

The only ray of hope in this dark horror has been the principled, disciplined and peaceful protest by the waste-pickers who barred entry to the dump on Wednesday morning in protest, and demanded that the mayor Chris Ndlela, come and meet with them. In response, and before the proposed pellet-gun security policy went into effect, police met courageous protesters with stun grenades, rubber bullets, and arrests – and Mayor Ndlela shamefully refused to come and listen and engage. So let us at least be clear that in this situation, credible threats of targeted violence have been issued solely from the state, and have been directed at some of the poorest in our society whose lives are marked daily by intolerable levels of violence and violation.

But despite being made poor; despite being regarded as less-than-human scavenging animals; despite being treated with utter contempt by the City bosses; despite being relentlessly portrayed as more-or-less violent and criminal; and despite being threatened, shot at, and arrested; it is the waste-pickers who have consistently thought and offered the possibility of a more humane and dignified way through the mess we're all in. Years back, organised waste pickers on this site were integral to the formulation of a proposal for their incorporation, as a waste-picker-run co-op, into a recycling project. This entirely rational idea got government support and millions of rands were in fact allocated to install the necessary infrastructure and get the thing going. But between the regional and local governments, the project stalled. It stalled so long that, after several years, central government took the money back. It now seems most likely that the stalling was engineered so that an entirely different on-site project could take its place. The new proposed project has no place for recycling – let alone waste-pickers, but will instead require ongoing supplies of large amounts of waste and presumably offer more direct benefits to the city's political bosses: it's a plan to incinerate waste – a notoriously dangerous environmental prospect – and generate electricity.

Right now and unsurprisingly, it is clear that waste pickers feel very angry indeed – their longer term hopes for a more sustained and properly-organised mode of waste recycling have been trampled, and the conditions of their continued self-organised waste recycling looks likely to get much worse being overseen by hyped-up armed security. Notwithstanding that anger, it remains the waste-pickers who act peacefully with openness and dignity - unlike the mayor who refused to come and listen, and unlike the police who disrupt, threaten, shoot and arrest. Even in the heat of the confrontation between protesters and police, with a burning barricade behind them and belligerent police in front threatening to shut them down, the people sat down to deliberate collectively on their options and decide a way forward. For instance, one proposal they were asked to consider was to abandon the protest and agree that a small group of them set up a later meeting with the city bosses. The idea was roundly and angrily rejected. People told me they have been asking for meetings for years now, they have marched to council before, they have written letters before, and eventually, 'enough is enough' – they remained firm in their insistence that the mayor must come to them and engage meaningfully. They can and should feel proud of the power and dignity they asserted while they held the barricade and prevented 'business as usual'. Their message before, during, and after was clear and public: they do not accept their dehumanisation - as the protesters' posters insisted: “siyaFuna iMayor”; “we need freedom”; “we are the people”.