

Burning and looting: ‘law enforcement’ in Maritzburg lockdown-style

August – October 2020

Reflection – October

During August this year (2020) in CLP’s hometown of Pietermaritzburg, a couple of very worrying events came to light. Both involved the deployment of armed wings of the state (as well as other departments). Immediately afterward, we thought we might be able to publicly condemn them and open a wider public conversation. For various reasons that didn’t happen. But we are sharing what we wrote about it now, and offering some reflections, because what’s at stake matters. Under our current circumstances, overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps psychologically-exhausted by its impacts, and working in a narrowed public space following the restrictions that have been imposed, perhaps it was understandable that the building a wider public process of engagement and campaigning did not gain traction. There are many reasons beyond that too, but we want to highlight aspects that feel important for thinking and acting to change our world together.

In particular, we became aware that so much default (un-)thinking about ‘activism’ and ‘campaigning’, externalizes the focus of condemnation. In this particular case, as you will see, there are undoubtedly things to name and condemn – and we do so. But it can be shallow and disingenuous to externalise the target of condemnation to the point of obscuring our collective complicity in the situation that produces injustice. It’s too easy, and frankly abdicates taking responsibility for the collective work of making things new. Until we confront our present reality and honestly locate the part/s we play in the ongoing processes of weaving together of the relations, the actions and the patterns of thinking that sustain and reproduce it, we cannot free ourselves to make it anew.

What happened in August shows high and deep levels of authorisation & condonation for apparently illegal and violent deployment of the police and the army. It seems to us that this happens not only because we are dangerously close to being a mafia state but because there is widespread endorsement for ways of thinking about our deep collective crises that avoids honesty, that avoids confronting their truth as such, and that avoids the task of thinking together: ‘how can all of us who are here now, do this better?’. Instead people are encouraged to scapegoat some its worst features onto vulnerable communities of shady ‘foreign’ traders or essentially-‘criminal’ shack-dwellers, or to avoid taking responsibility by an insistence on better technocratic management of the crises our society is being crippled by, rather than changing our collective ways of being and doing so we stop reproducing the crises at all.

Statement – August

Recent actions by law enforcement in our town raise worrying questions: have they gone rogue?; are black, poor, and immigrant people being bullied and targeted?; how high up does the authorisation and coordination go? Sadly, if – as seems likely - the worst case scenario for each of these turns out to be correct, that would merely confirm the longstanding experience and anecdotal evidence of ‘vulnerable’ groups at the hands of the armed wings of the state here. This is very dangerous indeed – and not just for those of our neighbours currently targeted, but for the whole of our Pietermaritzburg community. Understanding what is going down requires that we also look honestly and ethically at our own levels of connection and complicity in the deep crises that are threatening our ‘Maritzburg community and environment.

There are two recent incidents in particular that need careful public scrutiny – and collective reflection:

* 10 July – a mafia-style violent shakedown and shooting spree in West and Pietermaritz streets that morphed into a joint operation formally “involving the police, the army and immigration officials” (Clive Ndou, “Shop owners Relief”, *The Witness*, 11 August 2020) and resulted in multiple deaths and injuries; and

* 7 August – a joint operation involving “the police, the army, municipal security, the departments of Environmental Affairs, Community Safety and Liaison and Home Affairs” (Niyanta Singh, “Joint operation busts dump”, *The Witness*, 9 August 2020) to burn down the homes of poor people living adjacent to the town’s rubbish dump.

Regarding the fatal shooting spree in West and Pietermaritz streets, outstanding investigative [reporting](#) by Gref Ardé (see his attached article), who has interviewed the people directly affected and has viewed CCTV footage from the day, strongly supports victims’ families’ view that “the shooters were police disguised as bandits” (Greg Ardé, “Mystery of Maritzburg’s Masked Murderers”, *New Frame*, 6 August 2020). The Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) are investigating police involvement in the violent and illegal raid on stores run by migrant traders from Ethiopia, Malawi and elsewhere, and they have already taken one of the cop’s service pistols. From the victim’s careful narratives, it’s clear the raid was a violent and bullying shakedown for cash and cigarettes carried out by armed and (at least partially) disguised thugs but in all likelihood, police. After it became chaotic, the area was shut down by uniformed police, and witnesses on the scene offering to identify attackers were told by cops to ‘f*ck off’. Ardé reports that “a week after the shooting, police and army hit the Pietermaritzburg central business district again in a show of force. According to the *Weekend Witness*, police arrived with troops and Home Affairs officials, rounding up migrant traders and arresting 57 people. ... *Witness* reporter Clive Ndou wrote that the bustling business precinct resembled ‘a war zone, with heavily armed soldiers’... Police, he wrote, used crowbars to break stores open and army nyalas blocked roads and cut off escape routes. ‘The shop owners, some of whom were visibly terrified, were made to stand in the middle of the road from where they were loaded into police vans’”.

Let us turn to recent events at the dump site. After decades of well-publicised and scandalous mismanagement, years of utterly incoherent and fractious dealings with poor waste-pickers, and an almost complete collapse of the basic capacity to run the service, the dump had, once again, enveloped the city in the fumes of a toxic and out-of-control fire for days on end. Then the joined-up armed thuggery of police, army, municipal and migration security personnel arrived to “clean the dump” in the words of police spokesperson Sergeant Mthokozisi Ngobese (quoted by Niyanta Singh, in “Joint operation busts dump”, *The Witness*, 9 August 2020). By the time they were done, thirty four “foreign nationals” had been arrested, and all the shacks on the boundary of the dump site had been torched. Without a court order (clearly not obtained in this instance) the destruction of a home is an illegal act. Nonetheless, “MEC for Environmental Affairs, Nomusa Dube-Ncube, said the operation was endorsed by Premier Sihle Zikalala and the executive following the department’s presentation during the provincial executive council meeting. She said a joint operations centre had been established to deal with the landfill site” (Niyanta Singh, in “Joint operation busts dump”, *The Witness*, 9 August 2020).

It is clear that both incidents show a level of planning, authorisation and coordination that is deeply sinister. It is clear that both show levels of officially-backed and widely-supported xenophobia and bullying thuggery that is toxic. It is clear that both deal with issues of social inequality, economic vulnerability and environmental catastrophe that structure the very life, and indeed death, of our town, Pietermaritzburg. The way forward out of these multiple and overlapping crises should not be to imagine we can outsource them to armed thuggery. No, we need to be thinking together, in humane, clear, honest and principled ways, about how to overhaul the very basics of how we organise our lives and how we relate to each other and to the environment/s we share.