South Africa—The Struggle Continues

Mike Fleshman, Labor Desk Coordinator for the African Fund and a DC 1707 shop steward, has hailed the magnificent victory of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress on behalf of the people of South Africa. He also has urged continued support for the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU). Following are excerpts to an appeal from Fleshman to the labor community:

One result of the ANC victory is the presence of key labor leaders in the new government. Two high ranking unionists, former COSATU General Secretary Jay Naidoo, and former Assistant General Secretary Sydney Mufamadi, were named to cabinet posts—Mufamadi as Minister of Safety and Security in charge of the police, and Naidoo as Minister Without Portfolio, tasked with implementing the ANC/COSATU blueprint for social change, the National Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP).

They are among 20 union leaders elected to the 400-member national parliament on the ANC slate. Many other unionists were elected to South Africa's nine new regional parliaments. The presence of these "labor blocs" in the national and provincial parliaments, and the long alliance between the ANC and COSATU should give South African unions considerable influence over government policy in such key areas as labor, economic development and education and training policy.

With its recent election the struggle in South Africa shifts from political enfranchisement to economic empowerment, and the challenges ahead are daunting. Powerful commercial and political interests have targeted worker rights and workers' wages. Enormous pressure is being put on the Mandela government to go slowly with fundamental social and economic change. Gross mismanagement and systematic racism have saddled the new government with outmoded plants, high illiteracy and disease rates, and a financial gulf between privileged whites and poor Blacks that is the widest in the world.

South Africa's labor movement is changing to meet the challenges of the new era. What has not changed is their need for our support and solidarity. The strong union-to-union and worker-to-worker ties that developed between South African and U.S. labor during the campaign against apartheid should continue.

As South Africa takes on the legacy of apartheid, their struggles come increasingly to look like our own—for decent housing and schools, jobs and health care, fair wages and a decent contract. Americans have much to offer their South African sisters and brothers in the years ahead, and also much to learn. Let these common struggles and shared dreams form the new basis for U.S.-South Africa labor solidarity.