

International Conference on Building a Socially-Owned Renewable Energy Sector in South Africa

Vincent Mabuyakhulu Conference Centre (VMCC)

Johannesburg, 4th-8th February 2012



Summary

South Africa is embarking on developing its renewable energy sector. This development will be led by Independent Power Producers (IPPs). The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, (NUMSA) is critical of this private sector driven introduction of renewable energy, and has passed a resolution in favour of social ownership of renewable energy.

This conference is being organized in order to learn and flesh out this idea of what a worker-led socially-owned renewable energy sector might look like in order to develop a framework and concrete proposals for building such a sector in South Africa. We are interested to learn from international efforts to build different forms of socially-owned renewable energy sectors in other countries, as well as to learn about the dangers that people face due to the expansion of the sector along non-socially-owned lines, namely capitalist renewable energy development. We invite international participants to bring their experiences to shape this South African intervention, and we also hope and expect that they will learn from this intervention about possible national level interventions that they can make in their own countries.

There will be approximately 100 participants: 80 from South Africa, and 20 from other countries. The conference will last 5 days, and will take place in NUMSA's Vincent Mabuyakhulu Conference Centre (VMCC), in Johannesburg, South Africa. It will take place from the 4th-8th February 2012, with international participants arriving on the 3rd February, and leave on the 9th February.

Objectives

1. Create an international space in order to discuss a concrete intervention that is taking place at the national level, in South Africa. This will allow the South African intervention of building a socially-owned renewable energy to learn about experiences in other countries, in order to enrich the process. At the same time, the conference will allow international participants to learn and reflect on these efforts in order to make interventions in their own countries.
2. Collectively reflect on the benefits of different forms of socially-owned renewable energy, and the obstacles in achieving this kind of development of the sector, which is rapidly expanding along capitalist lines. This includes **sharing information and experiences about:**
 - a. **positive democratic and participatory ownership models that already exist in the renewable energy sector.** This may include examples of local, cooperative, municipality, community, or public ownership, as well as worker ownership and small scale individual ownership, over a range of different renewable energy technologies.
 - b. **the threats and encroachments that these models are currently facing. This includes:** investors, privatisation, territorial enclosure, inappropriate political regulations, or the inability to compete in markets, as well as the obstacles that exist to promoting and replicating these models on a wide scale and evenly throughout the world (especially relating to lack of access to capital, technology and an appropriate regulatory framework).
 - c. **the emerging conflicts within the sector:** This especially includes conflicts relating to: i) ownership and control of renewable energy infrastructure, technologies, and factories where infrastructure is produced, ii) ownership and control of territories (especially rural ones) containing and abundance of renewable energy resources (eg wind, sun, biomass, water and geothermal), iii) work in the sector (eg health and safety, redundancies, pay, rights to collective organizing, training etc), iv) choice of technology and scale (eg decentralized vs centralized, offshore vs onshore etc), v) what energy is being produced for and who/what is consuming it.
3. Contribute towards highlighting the division that is emerging within the renewable energy sector between those who defend an expansion of the sector along the lines of public, common or community ownership and control and those who see the sector as nothing more than a tool for capital accumulation. Stimulate debate within the renewable energy sector itself, where the level of discussion on these issues is still very weak, and forcing people to take sides on the issue.

All of this will allow for:

1. Laying the basis within NUMSA for a long term process of developing the skills and knowledge base amongst a wide range of workers in the key industrial sectors so that they are able to take a leading role in developing the renewable energy sector under social ownership and control.
2. Laying the basis for NUMSA to develop a strong energy policy aimed at shaping South Africa's industrial development in this field. Having such an energy policy will allow NUMSA to engage with relevant policy frameworks, such as the review of Integrated Resources Plan

(IRP 2010), South Africa's electricity policy framework from now till 2030, and the proposed Integrated Energy Plan (IEP).

3. Having an energy policy will also allow NUMSA to engage with different organizations within South Africa (especially the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and its member unions, the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), as well as internationally (such as the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), and other sympathetic union bodies).
4. Bringing people together from different energy related organisations in South Africa in order to lay the foundations for creating a broad based social process that will be strong enough to have a significant and rapid impact in defining how the renewable energy sector develops in South Africa.

Key Strategic Discussions

The following are key themes which we will discuss:

1. How to make the expansion of the renewable energy sector occur much faster than is currently happening? How to ensure that this expansion is in the interest of communities and the working class?
2. What kind of global interventions are necessary in order to promote, defend and deepen this process at a national level?
3. How to finance these interventions, in particular based on a discussion of how to harness:: fossil fuel revenue, pension funds, and the wealth from society's key means of production, in an international process of reparations.

Categories of Participants

South African Participants

1. The bulk of the participants from South Africa will be from NUMSA. This will include: national and regional office bearers; shopsteward members of Research and Development Groups (RDGs), coming from the different regions and key sectors in which NUMSA organizes workers; sector coordinators; educators and researchers.
2. Smaller numbers of participants will also come from:
 - a. Other areas of the South African trade union movement. This will include the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), as well as trade unions in the energy and energy intensive industries, as well as the public sector.
 - b. Urban and rural community and environmental NGOs working on the issue of democratic access to clean energy.
 - c. Policy makers, especially from the ANC and the SACP.
 - d. Government and other state institutions.
 - e. Academics and researchers.

International Participants

Organisations, institutions and individuals with experience and expertise working in the following areas:

1. Different forms of socially-owned renewable energy, either at the level of infrastructure, manufacture, research and policy.
2. Non-commercial renewable technology transfer and open source research organizations; Democratic and participatory renewable energy technology design.
3. Trade unions and other worker organizations, especially metal worker unions, struggling in the renewable energy sector, especially in relation to the industrial production of infrastructure, as well as relating to installation and maintenance.
4. Struggles to defend different models of socially-owned renewable energy against encroaching privatisation.
5. Rural communities whose territories are rich in renewable energy resources and who are resisting the effects of companies and other investors taking control of these territories to exploit renewable energies along capitalist lines.
6. Organisations and individuals working on radical alternatives for financing a socially-owned renewable energy sector. This may include:
 - a. solidaristic financing initiatives and institutions related to renewable energies;
 - b. trade unionists responsible for negotiating how pension funds are invested and defining pension strategy;
 - c. organisations and institutions promoting an international process of reparations to finance technology transfer, based in recognition of historical and present climate debt owed by northern countries to southern countries.

Structure and format

The seminar will make use of the following structures and formats:

1. Interventions designed to give information about a specific experience, policy or case study will be made as presentations by invited participants.
2. All presentations will be followed by open plenary discussion and questions by all participants.
3. Discussions structured according to certain guiding questions, with discussions chaired by NUMSA.
4. Debates about particular themes where there is a range of perspectives.
5. Group discussions, with plenary reportbacks.
6. Short discussion documents will be generated around specific themes during the first four days, and will then be presented as a starting point for the discussion on the last day.
7. There will be simultaneous interpretation between Spanish, French and English.

Documentation

1. A collection of relevant articles and links will be made available on the NUMSA website. Participants will be encouraged to send in advance articles that they consider relevant, so that these can also be included on the website.

2. A preparatory reader will be made for the participants. This will also contain biographical information about the main invited participants, a programme for the conference and other relevant information, including logistics. This will be in English, with the most essential parts also translated into Spanish.
3. Presentations made during the seminar will be documented on the NUMSA website after the event.
4. Audio and video recordings of the presentations and discussions will also be included on the website after the event.