

STATEMENT

IEJ TO ATTEND CONFERENCE OF THE LEFT AS OBSERVER

29 May 2026

BACKGROUND

The Conference of the Left, due to take place on 29 - 31 May in Johannesburg, South Africa, has elicited a wide range of public debate. The Conference is convened by the South African Communist Party (SACP) and a multi-party Steering Committee. The Conference states that it aims to strengthen the organised social power and coordinate action across diverse left formations in order to confront and dismantle racial, patriarchal, and class domination. Topics central to the Conference include property and ownership; the cost of living; employment and industrial strategy; land and food sovereignty; local government accountability; climate and just transition; and safety and security. Amongst other outcomes, the Conference seeks the establishment of a 'Council of the Left' – a coordination platform to facilitate joint campaigns, sustain shared political education, maintain continuity between conferences, and strengthen collective left intervention in public life.

The Conference has elicited both support and contestation within left formations in South Africa, including public statements from trade unions, political parties, social movements, and public intellectuals and activists. As an organisation who understands workers and communities as the engine of social change and seeks to partner with a wide range of progressive social actors, the IEJ has followed these exchanges closely. The IEJ was also formally invited to the Conference and has been kept abreast of developments through bilateral engagements with members of the Steering Committee.

IEJ'S CONCERNS

IEJ shares a number of the concerns raised by other left formations. These have been shared with the conference organisers formally in a comradely spirit. These concerns fall into two primary baskets: procedural and compositional.

Procedural concerns

Given the inherently contentious nature of such an event, the IEJ feels it is unfortunate that issues of participation, leadership, and composition played out publicly amongst key institutions of the left rather than these issues having been resolved prior to the event being made public. The widest possible advanced buy-in should have been a key criteria before the process was formally launched. This would also have obviated issues raised about the SACP's leadership role, given legitimate concerns about the SACP's alliance with the ANC and active participation in national government to date. The complaint raised by certain organisations about their logo / organisational name being used without permission is also concerning. The IEJ itself did not receive any prior communication regarding being assigned roles within the programme. Finally, given the importance of the event, greater transparency over the sources of funding for the Conference from the outset would have been appropriate.

Compositional concerns

To the organisers' credit, the character of the Conference has been articulated in the various conference documents. These have clearly established the conference as based on principles of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-xenophobia, and accountability, as well as a clear rejection of corruption, abuse, patriarchy, authoritarian conduct, and reactionary politics. Within this, the organisers have noted the desire to take an inclusive approach, not wishing to impose ideological uniformity.

While allowing for some level of ideological diversity is positive, the IEJ believes that individuals or organisations who have publicly and persistently deviated from these principles (for example, promoting xenophobia, or being systemically involved in corruption) should not be accredited to attend the Conference, should not have been included in the Steering Committee, and should not be included in future activities. The IEJ believes it is regrettable that this has not been the case, resulting in much of the public fallout surrounding the Conference. This is a matter of political principle. Proactively excluding such individuals and organisations delineates, in a consistent and credible manner, what it means to be on the left.

We further believe that more was needed to proactively engage all the diverse parts of the left that hold true to these principles. In this regard, feminist organisations in particular appear woefully underrepresented on the list of attendees, despite the prominence of women's rights issues within the conference documents. Given the historic marginalisation of women and LGBTQI+ groups within our patriarchal society, this should have been a higher priority for the conference organisers. This is particularly important in a global context where solidarity is needed from organisations on the left to protect and further historical gains in gender equality in an era of global backlash.

Other concerns

We acknowledge that the above does not capture all the concerns raised in the public debate, nor does it attempt to. The above are some critical issues that the IEJ feels are foundational to our participation and which we have engaged the conference organisers on. On some other issues, for instance, the debate about whether the political and economic

agenda articulated is sufficiently radical, the IEJ is withholding judgement pending the conference outcomes. On other issues, the IEJ may not yet have had the opportunity to develop a position.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Despite these concerns, the IEJ views the Conference of the Left, in principle, as an important opportunity to engage with other left formations and an important environment within which to raise the issues that the IEJ works on, which overlap with many of the conference themes. We believe that constructive engagement and collaborative action, within left formations, are essential in the current moment. This is also an opportunity for constructive contestation over the issues outlined above to play out. The IEJ is appreciative of the initiative taken by the Conference organisers, despite, as noted above, believing that important aspects could and should have been approached differently.

THE IEJ'S DECISION

Within this context, the IEJ's approach was to:

1. Accept the invitation to attend the Conference without this acceptance indicating organisational endorsement for the Conference, its composition, or its pending outcomes;
2. Note our concerns in a letter to the conference organisers. That letter noted that these concerns would need to be assuaged in order for the IEJ to participate fully in the Conference or subsequent activities; and
3. Decline the offer to take a prominent role within the Conference (for instance, facilitating or presenting to a Commission), although agreeing to contribute substantively on the relevant issues from the floor within Commissions.

We noted to the organisers that should they wish to list IEJ on the website to please indicate this understanding, for instance, by citing the IEJ as an 'Observer' or similar category of attendee. We also suggested that a similar format of participation could be considered for other organisations.

We noted explicitly that for the IEJ to participate more fully, it would be important to ensure the procedural concerns raised by left formations are addressed proactively in order to ensure the widest possible participation moving forward. We also noted that for the IEJ to more fully participate in the Conference, or to take part in future activities, the willingness of the Steering Committee to actively apply the principles identified as criteria for inclusion or exclusion is paramount. This must mean actively excluding any individuals or organisations persistently or systematically adopting chauvinistic, misogynistic, racist, sexist, xenophobic, corrupt, or other behaviour that violates the principles identified.

The IEJ made these positions known to the organisers, and is doing this now publicly, with an appreciation of our positionality as a research institute. The IEJ is not a membership organisation or working-class movement. We are a progressive policy think tank staffed by professionals, activists, and scholars. We do not want to overstate the role we should play in influencing how the Conference is organised or constituted; there are organisations who actually represent masses of working people who should have much more say in that than

we should. We simply wanted to state our own approach to this important engagement. We are making this clear publicly now, should our partners and allies wish to understand our rationale for attendance and what this conveys about who we are and what we stand for.

CONCLUSION

That the current conjuncture is placing extreme pressure on the poor and working class in our society is beyond doubt. That this calls for renewed commitment and action from the left is without question. That this requires collaboration across our parties, movements, organisations, and formations is clear. Whether the Conference of the Left will be an effective vehicle for this is something the IEJ is uncertain of at this point. The concerns that we raise above are sufficient for us to not wish to formally endorse the Conference, its composition, or its pending outcomes.

However, having noted them and considered the sort of organisation we are, these concerns do not prevent us from constructively engaging the initiative or strengthening our relationships with those participants and organisers with whom we share common principles. We understand and respect that our partners and allies have made a range of decisions - including to endorse, or distance themselves from the initiative, or to continue to engage the organisers in an attempt to address their concerns. We do not intend to foist our decision on others, but feel it is an appropriate approach for who we are as an organisation, and where we find ourselves in this particular moment. This statement is intended to share that rationale in the spirit of transparency and comradely engagement.

[ENDS]



The Institute for Economic Justice (IEJ) is a progressive economic policy think tank committed to advancing economic justice, systemic change, and the equitable distribution of resources to ensure rights realisation and planetary wellbeing.

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