



Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, Gauteng, 10 April 2003

## **Blade Nzimande, SACP General Secretary**

*Address at the Chris Hani Memorial Lecture*

# **Chris Hani**

*Freedom fighter, liberator, gender activist and communist*

The life and memory of Chris Hani has become one of the major symbols for the aspirations of the poor and working people in South Africa. His life, sacrifices, dedication and example captured a person whose entire life was dedicated to the service of ordinary poor and working people. Whilst South Africa has many heroes and heroines who lived and died for similar aspirations, but Chris Hani was murdered on the eve of the beginnings of the realisation of the aspirations of the majority of South Africans. His assassination also directly led to the securing of 27 April 1994 as the date for the first ever democratic elections in South Africa. His memory lives fondly in the hearts and minds of millions of South Africans.

### **Hani the communist**

Hani's life is also about our South African Communist Party which has an unparalleled history in our country. We are a Party that has been in the midst of all the great popular and working class struggles of our people. Thousands of AmaKomanisi - sons, daughters and tributes of our people - first in sacrifice, first in commitment and hard work, we are proud of our traditions, and we are proud of our outstanding cadres. In the midst of struggle, our Party has pioneered many of the most important traditions of the South

African struggle (including progressive trade unionism, pioneered non-racism, night schools and cadre development, tireless organisational work, unity of women around progressive demands, rural struggles, revolutionary journalism, revolutionary theory, revolutionary martyrs).

As former COSATU President, John Gomomo, put it at Hani's funeral "When he was elected to the mammoth task of General Secretary of the SACP, he proved himself a committed communist. Today he would be in Gugulethu calling for housing, tomorrow in the mines calling for an end to retrenchments, dismissals, and for workers to be paid a living wage. As if that was not enough, two days later he would be in Venda calling for health improvement and later lead a march by teachers and students around educational needs". Hani's idea was of a portable, dynamic, flexible, strong and vibrant SACP committed unapologetically to the cause of socialism. This is the legacy that Hani left for the SACP.

One of the first campaigns that Chris Hani led soon after being elected General Secretary of the SACP in 1991 was what we called the Triple H campaign addressing housing, hunger and health. The question of access to health by all was something that Cde Chris was very passionate about, together with the provision of basic services. In his own words, he said:

*"Socialism is not about big concepts and heavy theory. Socialism is about decent shelter for those who are homeless. It is about water for those who have no safe drinking water. It is about health care, it is about a life of dignity for the old. It is about overcoming the huge divide between urban and rural areas. It is about education for all our people. Socialism is about rolling back the tyranny of the market. As long as the economy is dominated by an un-elected, privileged few, the case for socialism will exist."*

Captured in this statement is not just a simple articulation of socialism. It also captures something that we sometimes tend to forget when we talk about health. In many instances we have reduced health to hospitals, clinics and other medical services. Health is much broader than that. For people to be healthy they need to have jobs and other means of sustainable livelihoods so that they can eat. Health is also about access to housing, cleaning drinking water, education and literacy so that health awareness and prevention of diseases can be easily promoted. Health is indeed about a complete life of dignity and all that this requires.

We also have no doubt that were Chris alive today he would be visiting villages, factories, townships, mines, etc leading a struggle against the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He would be in the forefront in mobilising people for awareness as well as to fight the pharmaceutical companies around the privatisation of patent rights and high prices of drugs. We must intensify our struggle against this pandemic as part of commemorating this hero of our struggle.

Chris Hani was elected General Secretary of our Party as he rose to number two in MK. Much to the surprise of those who did not know him well, in December 1991 he left this position, and accepted election as the SACP's full-time general secretary. Several newspaper columnists considered this to be a "surprising career move". But Chris was

never a careerist. His first love was the Communist Party, and he wisely understood that building a mass-based, working class party and nurturing thousands of young communist cadres was a critical task, not least for the sake of the longer-term survival of the ANC itself.

Cde Chris had many positive personality traits. He was brave, unflinchingly leading comrades while under enemy fire, or speaking up, without fear, against errors and anomalies within his own organisation. He was always intellectually alert, and loved literature, quoting long passages from Shakespeare by heart. He was a tireless organiser. In the last two years of his life, he moved, week in and week out, from one obscure rural village to another, organising, listening, recruiting. While the speeches made at the CODESA talks (and some of them were very long-winded and boring) are all to be found in the contemporary press reports and archival records, the dozens of speeches Chris was making almost every day in those last years of his life went largely unreported. But in villages all over South Africa, people still remember them.

### **Hani as a disciplined cadre and leader of the ANC**

It is difficult to separate Chris as a communist from Chris as an ANC cadre and leader, because he lived both these realities, in an integrated manner. As we remember Chris Hani, we must also remind ourselves of the kind of ANC, alliance, leaders and cadres we need in South Africa today. Hani was both a communist and a disciplined member and leader of the ANC. As a result he rose through the ranks of MK and the ANC. In no way did he regard himself or was he regarded (by disciplined ANC members) as a step cousin in the ANC. Without poor and working people and a bias towards them, the ANC becomes a different organisation from the one that Hani and thousands of other communists built.

For Hani being a disciplined ANC member and leader also meant that he was forthright in expressing his views in a conducive environment for open debate without being submissive. As forthright as he was, he was also a good listener to other views and people. His open letter critical of how the armed struggle was conducted led to the famous Morogoro Conference of the ANC which consolidated its strategy and tactics from the late 1960s. The letter was not easily welcomed and it made the situation difficult but he did not hesitate to state his views in the interests of advancing the struggle. He was also forthright in his criticism of the suspension of the armed struggle without adequate intra-ANC and alliance debate. Adequate alliance debate is a basic principle we should not trample on at all times. Frankness is a critical quality given the danger of careerism and ideological opportunism faced by our revolution in the current period.

Hani's life and struggle in both the ANC and the SACP embodied his concrete understanding that the National Democratic Revolution is both an important goal in itself, but at the same time it is the most direct route to socialism. Conversely, he also understood that to advance the NDR requires the mobilisation of the working class consistently on socialist perspectives and approaches. In the current period, this means struggling against poverty, job losses, racism, capitalist banks and for social security and jobs for all.

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### **Hani as a gender activist**

Chris is well known for being a gender activist, a quality he acquired when he used to fetch water and wood from far in Sabalele. He came to understand practically the position of women, and the drudgery they are involved in in rural areas. Today, provision of accessible health services to all would liberate most women, who are the ones faced with the task of looking after the sick and the elderly and those dying from AIDS. Let us honour Chris for being a gender activist by increasing access to health services

### **Making Chris Hani Baragwanath an exemplary hospital of excellence**

In conclusion, as the SACP we would like to pose what is perhaps the most critical challenge for this institution. The very naming of this institution after Cde Chris is a challenge to the Soweto community, hospital workers and management to ensure that this becomes a hospital of excellence. We cannot let this institution be third or second grade, but it must be first grade as it is named after a quality leader. Soon I hope that all stakeholders can gather like this to discuss challenges and problems as well as the contribution and sacrifices they will make to make Chris Hani Baragwanath to live after its name.

**Thank you**

**Blade Nzimande  
General Secretary**

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