

Malema Tells Whites in South Africa: Join the Struggle or Else ...

by

<http://www.africanglobe.net>
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November 3, 2015



Economic Freedom Fighters members march on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange

AFRICANGLOBE – Julius Malema’s challenge about personal and systemic racism should be seen as an opportunity to examine how racism and whiteness has thwarted authentic transformation.

When an estimated 50,000 EFF marchers arrived at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) on Tuesday afternoon they found they had been locked out. This prompted a visibly irked Julius Malema, the party’s commander-in-chief, to directly tackle the issue of racism when he called members of the JSE “bladdy racists” and told them their days are numbered here.

He also conveyed to them in firm tones that they are so racist they do not belong in South Africa. “We don’t want racists here. You must pack your bags and go!”

After JSE chief executive Nicky Newton-King joined Malema on the stage, he spoke directly to her in impassioned tones about the disparaging way whites perceive and treat Black people.

“We may look ugly to you, but we are human. We just want to be treated with respect – please.” After she had signed the memorandum, Malema assured white people that it is only racists who are not welcome in South Africa – but they would hold hands with whites who are prepared to join the call for equality.

“We will never tolerate white supremacy, racism. Down with racism, down!”

Malema is the only party leader in South Africa thus far who has boldly spoken to and challenged the ongoing problem of racism in our society. His call for the dismantling of racist institutions and practice in South Africa is a promise to people who have been directly affected by pervasive white supremacy that this issue is high on their party’s agenda.

“We will not be speaking this reconciliation nonsense, which only perpetuates white supremacy,” he assured the masses of largely economically disenfranchised followers gathered in the streets of Sandton.

Many white people responded to Malema’s anti-racism utterances on social media by denying being white supremacists or racists.

They said Malema is irrational and aggressive and he is speaking only about the right wing supremacists that are aggressively racist towards Black folk in South Africa but painting all whites with the same brush. Instead of seeing his utterances as pro-equality, they said his discourse is “anti-white” and claimed he was being unfair to them.

Except he is not. Malema's forthright challenge to white people about personal lateral and systemic racism is the truth that resonates with those on the receiving end of it.

This should not be overlooked by white South Africans.

Instead it should be seen as an opportunity by us to examine how racism and whiteness are intertwined and how this has thwarted authentic transformation and egalitarianism in South Africa.

We remain locked in a lopsided race-class system 21 years into a democracy that was meant to deliver equality and dignity for all who lived in this land.

Rather than react with fear and denial to Malema's challenge to racism, let's consider how whiteness and white privilege oppress those "not white" and thwarts transformation.

White people can reflect on and change if they are committed to being part of the transformed and equal future that Malema's words speak to.

There are five ways in which white people can achieve this:

A refusal to understand what whiteness is. Many white people refuse to engage with, understand and reflect on what whiteness is. Instead, they get defensive and take the term whiteness to mean white individuals alone, thus turning it into a personal affront.

But "whiteness" is a powerful social construct that has palpable and violent effects on people who are considered Black. This plays out via the practice of racism.

Racism and whiteness are interwoven and are both social constructs that are enforced through power and violence.

While racism was considered more violent in the days of apartheid, white people were able to shift the boundaries of white privilege and racism in a reconciliation period. This meant changing the language of racism into a more acceptable lexis under the disguise of the Rainbow Nation discourse.

In this way, racism and whiteness seemed innocuous and whites made claims to being non-racist. But the fact that Black lives and Black economic reality did not shift for the majority of Black South Africans means that white privilege remained intact and racist language, though covert, is as equally violent as overt racism.

Speaking in reconciliatory language while doing nothing to shift white privilege does nothing more than disguise deeper systemic issues of economic racism and is, in fact, an attempt to normalise social inequalities. Whiteness is the continuous production of a dominant culture that is dependent on the subordination of blackness as the inferior other.

It is the “normalised” standard in relation to the “marginality” of black standards. It is this manufacturing of white privilege that disadvantages the majority of Black people.

* Not making the connection between whiteness, privilege and individual lateral, institutional and systemic racism. White people benefit enormously from racism the world over and most have no motivation or desire to change or dismantle structural mechanisms meant to keep Black folk locked in oppression. Whiteness has naturalised itself as the master race and refuses to see that this elevation of whites as a race is wholly reliant on keeping Blacks as the underclass. This relies on individuals within the white collective to practise lateral racism towards Black people in their employ and in their institutions.

Because most white people have refused to fully embrace this reality, they have thwarted transformation in South Africa while paying lip service to transformation processes. Whites are indoctrinated to think they are more deserving of benefits and dignity than our Black counterparts.

* Through depoliticised liberal discourse. The truth and reconciliation process did little to force radical transformation in the country. Nor did it do anything to transform the racist thinking that was deeply embedded into the white settler psyche over a few centuries. Rather, it allowed liberal white South Africa to reduce racism to individualism. In other words racism in this Rainbow Nation trope became about how many Black friends white folk had or how politely they spoke to their gardeners – and nothing to do with lateral, institutional and systemic racism. In fact, it reinscribed what has become to be known as the invisibility of white privilege through a liberal discourse which pays lip service to transformation while holding on to white privilege. While there is such a phenomenon as white privilege, there can never be transformation so this approach to non-racism and transformation does nothing to change society on a deeper level. It is merely cosmetic.

* Mistaking multiculturalism for non-racism. Rainbow Nation and social-cohesion multicultural discourse has become a shallow process of nation building based on multiculturalism, which is often mistaken for non-racism – but it in fact reinscribes racism and race stereotypes by again setting up whiteness as the norm and other cultures as special. It renders other cultures unable to articulate an identity outside of the exotic and different.

Multiculturalism is all about cultural diversity in a framework of superficial culture. This includes certain “safe” struggle icons such as Nelson Mandela, cultural holidays, celebrations, dance, food and dress. These are the things which are meant to make us embrace each other as human – but do not.

This is what race educator Jane Bolgatz refers to as the “heroes and holidays approach”.

In fact, what it has done is depoliticise struggle heroes, whitewash Black struggles and turned what should be days that commemorate Black heroes into boerewors and braai days. It dishes up blackness on an exotic platter that suits white cultural norms and reinforces whiteness as central to the human experience.

* Holding on to whiteness to protect white privilege and institutional racism. Whiteness exists to protect white privilege – which it considers fair game and does not recognise this privilege as amassed on the blood of the oppressed. Whiteness rather refers to this accumulation of wealth and privilege as existing because of their hard work.

Not only does this cancel out the lived experience of Black people, who were historically oppressed and used as cheap labour in this country – and who physically built the infrastructure and wealth of this land – it also gives whites an excuse to protect their so-called hard-earned wealth at all costs.

In this way, Black people can be silently and covertly oppressed so as not to threaten white hegemony.

In this framework, Black progress is perceived as a threat to this wealth and so liberal discourse will pay lip service to transformation while undermining Black progress in multiple and insidious ways.

They will often point to overt racists as the problem while continuing to practice covert racism in their own businesses, institutions, places of higher learning and in the media.

Until white people begin to understand the multiple layers of whiteness and white privilege and the impact this has both on the economically disenfranchised and oppressed Black people of this land, then we will never be able to join in the call for authentic transformation and equality. If the idea of sharing wealth, resources and social spaces with fellow Black people is unacceptable to you then perhaps it is time to heed Malema’s call.

Retrieved: March 19, 2016 from <http://www.africanglobe.net/africa/malema-whites-south-africa-join-struggle/>



EFF mass protesters in Johannesburg