Who decides after the election?

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On behalf of the World Federation of Democratic Youth

Botswana National Front Youth League National Youth Convention
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Comrade President Tumelo Legase, delegates to the Botswana National Front Youth League National Youth Convention, comrades and friends, dumelang.

When I had the honour of addressing your elective congress in Kang last year, I spoke as National Secretary of the Young Communist League of South Africa. We proposed that our two leagues hold joint political schools. Today I bring you revolutionary greetings from the World Federation of Democratic Youth. Thank you for inviting us back and for asking a question that every youth movement in our region has reason to take seriously.

“Two Years In: Where Are the Youth, and Where Do We Go From Here?” Some of the young people you are asking about have already sent an answer. In April, interns took a petition to the Department of Employment Services. Precious Kiberu, speaking for the petitioners, wanted to know why graduates placed in an institution because of their qualifications could be barred from applying when a job opened inside it.

By then your colleagues know the quality of your work. The supervisor who trained you may be the very person who needs to fill the vacancy. **Why should the fact that you are an intern prevent you from applying?**

This month the Botswana Internship Committee has again set out what interns want. They want somebody to teach them the work they came to learn. They want to be paid on time. They want somewhere to take a grievance and an answer about what comes after the placement.

There is political leadership in the act of gathering those experiences and making a public case. A youth league ought to recognise its own people when they speak in that voice, whether they carry a party card or have never been to a branch meeting.

The interns have put a question to us in WFDY, too. Eighty-one years ago this month, young people gathered in London to found our federation. They had lived through fascism and world war. Alongside the undertaking to fight fascism and preserve peace, their founding pledge called for an end to “enforced idleness”.

I keep returning to those two words. They put the responsibility where it belongs. When a young person wants to work and a community needs what that person can do, an economy that keeps them apart has a case to answer. Who has the power to bring the two together? That is a question the people of Botswana have earned the right to put to their government.

Two years ago, young Batswana organised on campuses and went door to door. They helped bring the Umbrella for Democratic Change to government and end fifty-eight years of Botswana Democratic Party rule.

A movement that trusted a young woman to knock on a stranger’s door and explain why the country needed a new government can surely trust her to knock on a minister’s door now. She still represents the people to whom she gave her word.

Comrade Legase, you have said that this freedom to question extends to those of you who now hold office. That takes on a particular weight coming from the president of the League.

After your election in Kang, you explained that some constituencies had missed the congress because their youth structures were inactive. Consider what that meant for a young member there. A national leadership was elected in her name, and her constituency had no delegate there to speak or vote on her behalf. **Rebuilding that branch gives somebody back a right.** And if she uses it to disagree with the leader who helped rebuild it, the work has succeeded.

Five years ago, Comrade Mabuse Mpe and I described young people as “a critical body of opinion in the liberation movement”. Within the Young Communist League we take seriously our duty to prepare cadres for the South African Communist Party. Part of that education is learning how to tell a comrade you respect that a decision they took has hurt the people you both undertook to serve.

An older trade unionist who teaches a young worker to read a collective agreement is passing on a lifetime of struggle. The young worker who spots a clause that leaves temporary staff out has something to teach the veteran. A movement needs both of them at the bargaining table.

Botswana’s new labour law came into force in September. One question worth putting to a shop steward is how a worker on a short contract can exercise the right to organise when the supervisor decides next month whether to renew it.

What, then, should they bargain for? In Kang we spoke about the minerals beneath the soil of our two countries and the people whose labour gives those minerals their value. Botswana has real experience to bring to this discussion. Diamond earnings helped this country build public infrastructure and educate generations of Batswana. Yet the decisions of buyers far from Orapa or Jwaneng can still narrow the choices facing a family here.

A fall in demand enters that home as a shift lost, a contract cut short, a younger brother wondering whether the trade he wants to learn will still offer him work.

On 9 November, President Duma Boko told Parliament that the Diamonds for Development Fund had received its first billion pula from De Beers. That gives your convention a very practical opening. Suppose some of Botswana's mineral wealth is invested in a factory. Comrade Legase has asked who will get the jobs, what they will earn and what say workers will have in running it.

I would add a question for the day the machinery breaks down. By then, will a young Motswana have learnt enough, alongside an experienced artisan, to diagnose the fault, make the part and teach the next apprentice? **A country begins to command its own industry when that knowledge lives here and can be passed on here.**

This is where the class question enters. A citizen who owns shares in a factory and a citizen who works the night shift have a common interest in keeping the factory open. When the order book fills up and the workers ask for a share of what they have produced, the two can find themselves on opposite sides of the table. Both are Batswana. Our Pan-Africanism must have room to tell that truth.

For those of us who are communists, the case for socialism begins with the capacity of working people to decide together how the wealth they create will be used.

In Kang we also proposed that our countries cooperate in agriculture and manufacturing. Think of a school that buys food every term. A growers' cooperative could use a dependable order to put adjoining land into production and pay young people to learn irrigation or repair pumps.

Across our borders there is much we could share, from seed adapted to dry conditions to the skill of keeping that pump running. Whether a grower can keep supplying the school may turn on something as simple as whether the state pays on time. A branch in a farming district can bring that experience to a discussion that might otherwise begin and end with diamonds.

There is work enough. A village needs a reliable water supply. A clinic needs food for patients. A school needs furniture that can be repaired. In the Free State, young communists opened a soup kitchen at Dr Maile Clinic in Kgotsong, Bothaville. Local activists got it going again during the lockdown. Comrade Xolani Tseletsele and I wrote then about a patient who needs a meal in order to take medicine, and about the person who must cook that meal.

Our proposal was that the health department employ the kitchen staff and that social development supply the groceries. A community had identified a public need and shown how to meet it. The argument we put to the state was that the person who does that work has a claim to a wage.

With that kitchen in mind, consider what we mean when we call somebody unemployed. Statistics Botswana's 2024/25 survey put unemployment among those aged fifteen to thirty-five in the labour force at nearly twenty-nine per cent. The rate was higher for young women. Think of the care a young woman can give in a day while an official form quite accurately records that she has no paid job.

This week in Parliament, the member for Francistown West proposed opening a direct route into vocational training for young people who leave school after Form Three. It is worth asking those young people what it would take to get there. A family might manage the fare to a technical college once, for an interview. Finding that fare twice a day for six months is another matter. Childcare, transport and a place to live belong in a workers' programme. They determine who can take the job in the first place.

Our federation brings together young people with different political traditions around an anti-imperialist commitment. A people must be free to govern itself, and that freedom must reach the fields, the factories, the classrooms and the places where credit is granted or withheld.

The same young person who has a right to a trade has a right to peace in which to practise it. A government that can decide whether another people gets fuel for its hospitals exercises power over lives far beyond its borders. The organiser who speaks at the factory gate and the nurse who speaks out against a blockade both have a place in WFDY.

We should be as candid about the state of our own organisation as you are about yours. In May 2025, at our twenty-first General Assembly in Windhoek, the member organisations elected the YCLSA to the General Council. My league entrusted me to represent it there. Our incoming president, Comrade Gonçalo Lopes, spoke plainly about the federation's financial difficulties. He asked member organisations to pay dues according to their means, raise funds, bring our elected bodies together regularly and do more organising between assemblies.

A delegate who has to find an international fare knows the political meaning of those words. If only the organisations that can afford the journey take part in a discussion, the account we give of the world will be wrong.

Our responsibility on the General Council is to make sure political work can travel in both directions. The youth of Southern Africa have something to teach the federation about organising in mining towns, about movements that enter government, about keeping a branch alive when members must leave home to find work. And our members have the right to hear what we have learnt elsewhere.

Reports ought to come back in language a branch can use. Members should be able to challenge what their delegate said in their name. That is how an international federation earns the next contribution out of a worker's wages.

We have an example in our own practice. When WFDY organised a solidarity mission to Cuba in 2023, delegates went into hospitals, schools and neighbourhoods. Their Cuban hosts could tell them what the United States blockade meant in the course of an ordinary working day.

Last month the federation again called for an end to that blockade, drawing attention to what restrictions on fuel mean for water supplies and hospitals. A nurse knows how long a ward can function when the electricity goes. Her knowledge belongs in the international argument about sanctions. So does the knowledge of the intern in Botswana in any international discussion of decent work.

As a South African, I can scarcely speak to Batswana about international solidarity without first saying thank you. On 14 June 1985, the apartheid army attacked this city and killed twelve people.

A week later Botswana's Minister of External Affairs, Gaositwe Chiepe, stood before the United Nations Security Council. **She told the Council that Botswana would continue giving asylum to people fleeing apartheid.** She knew exactly what that undertaking could cost, and she gave it all the same. Every South African who now crosses this border in freedom owes something to the people who upheld that decision when it cost them so dearly.

We honour them when a migrant worker on our side of the border can count on a South African comrade to defend her dignity. We honour them in standing with Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and statehood, and with the Sahrawi people in their struggle to determine the future of Western Sahara.

Here too our federation can do something a single branch might find difficult. It can put young organisers in touch with one another. Let a Sahrawi youth organiser choose the question for a meeting on Western Sahara. Let a Palestinian student speak about what it takes to continue an education under occupation. Then let those who invited them take responsibility for the public work that follows.

Comrades, this brings me back to the joint political school we proposed in Kang. I ask you to consider giving its first session to the young people whose petition is already before the country.

If they agree, let the Botswana Internship Committee tell us which demand they want examined first. Invite a shop steward and someone responsible for administering the programme to sit with them. Our South African league could bring young workers who have gone through placements at home. One afternoon together over a real grievance would teach us more about the position of young labour in Southern Africa than a week of speeches about our potential.

Let the host branches choose one publicly backed workplace where they can follow what happens next. Establish what was promised and speak to the people doing the work. If a trainee has secured a lasting job, find out what made it possible so another branch can press for the same arrangement. If an employer repeatedly fills one post with a succession of interns, give the workers a hearing and the employer a chance to answer.

Take the findings to the union and the branches. Agree who will pursue the demand, and set a date when those comrades must come back and report. **The first people entitled to hear the answer are the ones who risked asking the question.**

When that date comes, Comrade President, I hope our two leagues will give the opening address to an intern. I would like to hear whether she could apply for the vacancy, whether her workmates stood with her, and what she thinks our organisations ought to do next.

In Kang we said that the people whose labour creates the wealth of Southern Africa have a claim on that wealth. In Gaborone we have a chance to honour the other half of that conviction. They can speak for themselves. When she rises, comrades, let those of us at the front take our seats and listen.

Long live the Botswana National Front Youth League. Long live the solidarity of the youth of Southern Africa. Long live the World Federation of Democratic Youth.

Ke a leboga.