



CJCM Statement A Worker's Day Call To Protect Our Water Commons and Call For A Climate Emergency Social Contract

1 May 2025

This Worker's Day, the Climate Justice Charter Movement (CJCM) honours the struggles of the working class; not only in factories, farms, and offices, but in the daily fight for dignity, basic services, and a livable future. Central among these struggles is the fight for access to clean, affordable, and reliable water. For millions of working-class people in South Africa, water injustice is a daily reality; marked by unsafe drinking water, dry taps, toxic rivers, and decaying infrastructure.

Water is a Working-Class Issue

From the townships of Gauteng to rural villages in the Eastern Cape, the collapse of water governance has most severely impacted poor and working-class communities. These communities—who bear the brunt of low wages, insecure work, and unsafe living conditions—are also those most likely to experience the harshest effects of climate shocks, failing water infrastructure, pollution, and waterborne illnesses.

Yet their voices remain excluded from decision-making, while private companies and corrupt interests treat water as a commodity instead of a life-sustaining right. This is why the CJCM's Water Commons Campaign was launched (on March 18th at a national People's Assembly) as a direct response to the water crisis as a class crisis.

A Campaign for the People, Led by the People

The CJCM's Water Commons Campaign centres the experiences of working-class communities and their role in shaping the solutions to the water crisis. To guide our efforts and interventions, the campaign is structured around three strategic areas of focus, each addressing different but interconnected dimensions of the crisis and its systemic drivers.

1. Water Crisis: Immediate Solidarity and Systemic Accountability

This area focuses on communities facing acute water shortages, contamination, and collapsing infrastructure. It prioritises immediate solidarity, support, and mobilisation in crisis-affected areas. Yet, we also insist that water injustice is not just a moment of emergency, it is the result of deep systemic failures. This area of focus highlights how austerity, mismanagement, and corruption have created conditions for recurring breakdowns, and that the path to resolution lies in structural change, not charity or technocratic fixes.

2. Systemic Risks to the Water Commons and Transformative Adaptation

This area addresses large-scale, national threats to South Africa's water future and puts forward bold, transformative adaptation demands. These include:

- Challenging unsustainable and exclusionary desalination schemes that deepen ecological and financial inequality.
- Exposing the water-intensiveness of green hydrogen development and demanding regulation to protect water for people and ecosystems.
- Demanding stronger controls on mining's impact on water sources, alongside corporate accountability for contamination and depletion.

Our focus reveals how the crisis is embedded in extractivist development models and calls for systemic adaptation to secure the commons.

3. Climate Crisis, Food Sovereignty, and the Polycrisis: Disaster Preparedness and Resilience

This area addresses the wider ecological and climate-induced disasters, especially floods and fires, that threaten communities, food sovereignty, and the water commons. Our demands include:

- For flooding: Restoring wetlands, banning developments in flood-prone areas, upgrading drainage and public infrastructure, and building climate-resilient housing.
- For fires: Promoting fire-resilient commons, regulating flammable plantations, investing in early-warning and response systems, and recognising Indigenous and community land stewardship.

Here we recognise that the water crisis is one part of a broader polycrisis, requiring integrated, democratic systemic reforms to protect the most vulnerable.

These three areas of focus reflect the CJCM's approach to building water justice from below: linking immediate action with long-term transformation, and uniting communities to reclaim the water commons through people's power and climate justice.

From Worker's Struggle to Climate Justice

The working class has always been on the frontlines of South Africa's social justice movements. Today, that frontline is expanding; to the poisoned river, the broken pipe, the dry tap. This Worker's Day, CJCM calls on all workers and their organisations (unions, cooperatives, associations, and civic groups) to stand with us in defending water as a commons.

But our campaign is not just about protecting water, it is about transforming the governance of life itself. The climate crisis is a working-class crisis, and the only sustainable way forward is through a Climate Emergency Social Contract (CESC): a people- and worker-driven covenant to reorganise society around justice, ecological stewardship, and democratic planning.

We cannot afford more elite-led deals that protect profit over people. As the country faces worsening droughts, floods, infrastructure collapse, rising hunger, and a fragile economy, only a bold, bottom-up national dialogue can chart a path toward a truly just and regenerative future. The CJCM supports the call for a CODESA-style national dialogue, but insists that its outcome must be a Climate Emergency Social Contract; one that is inclusive, participatory, and accountable to those most affected by the polycrisis: working-class communities, frontline workers, and the youth.

Such a social contract must:

- Recognise the climate crisis as the most dangerous threat facing our society and species.
- Be guided by the Climate Justice Charter and its vision of systemic alternatives grounded in care, justice, commons stewardship, and democratic governance.
- Provide the foundation for real climate justice through transformative adaptation and regeneration—from food sovereignty and eco-mobility to water commons protection and universal basic income.
- Shift the country away from failed “business as usual” economics and toward life- and eco-centric systems of democratic planning.

The CJCM's Water Commons Campaign is a key building block of this future. Through our three strategic areas of focus (solidarity with communities in crisis, confronting systemic risks to the water commons, and strengthening climate resilience in the face of floods and fire) we are already laying the groundwork for a deep just transition.

The fight for water justice is the fight for climate justice. And climate justice is the future of working class struggle.

We call on the Government of National Unity and Parliament to ensure the national dialogue process results in a Climate Emergency Social Contract, a people's pact for a livable future.

Get Involved

Join the movement. Sign up at <https://cjcm.org.za>, look out for our events, share our materials, and help build a democratic water commons from below.

Water justice is class justice. Let's accelerate the deep just transition.

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