

United front as proposed by Numsa:

What is it?

There is need to analyse the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa)'s proposal on a Movement for Socialism (made at its special national congress (SNC) in December 2013) using Trotsky's concept of the united front, argues **Ayanda 'Nyerere' Madyibi**.

The united front is a form of struggle or political organisation that may be carried out by revolutionaries or socialist political formulations. The basic theory of the united front tactic was first developed by the Communist International (Comintern), an international communist organisation created by communists in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

Based on the thesis of the 1922 4th World Congress of the Comintern: "The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie."

The united front will allow workers committed to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism to struggle alongside non-revolutionary workers. Through these common struggles (e-tolls, labour brokers, wage and service delivery issues, etc) revolutionaries

sought to win other workers to revolutionary socialism.

This is very important because of the differences between the 1922 call and the Numsa call. In 1922, you had massive communist parties and big social-democratic parties. This is the situation that does not exist in South Africa today. The united front that Numsa is calling for stems from the unevenness that exists within the working class and the disparate struggles that are happening on the shop floor and in communities.

Numsa's revolutionary socialists represent a minority in the broader South African working-class context, and the united front offer a method of working with large numbers of non-revolutionary workers, while simultaneously winning them to revolutionary politics.

This strategy should not be confused with the so-called 'electoral combinations' of leaders in pursuit of one or another parliamentary aim as the new Collective for Democracy, which consists of the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), Congress

of the People, the Freedom Front Plus, the Inkatha Freedom Party, and the United Christian Democratic Party. The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the socialists propose to join with all workers belonging to other unions like the Association of Mining and Construction Union, National Council of Trade Unions and progressive groups (Treatment Action Campaign, Right2Know, etc) and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the capitalists.

Numsa should not simply go over the heads of the leaders of reformist unions. They should approach these leaders demanding unity on the basis of a united front. This would pose a dilemma for the reformist leaders: refuse the invitation and be seen by their followers as an obstacle to unity, or accept the invitation and have to operate on the terrain of mass struggle (strikes, protests, etc) on which the revolutionaries would be proved to have superior ideas and methods.



In jovial mood: Delegates sing at Numsa Special National Congress in Boksburg, Johannesburg.

History has taught us that Stalinism came to dominate the Comintern and the united front strategy was dropped. In the period preceding Adolf Hitler's victory in Germany, the Stalinised Comintern argued that the social democrats were 'social fascists' and that they, rather than the Nazis, represented the real danger. Following Hitler's victory, the Comintern argued for *Popular Fronts* drawing in forces far beyond the working-class movement.

In an article written in 1921 on the united front, Leon Trotsky outlined three basic forces in the workers' movement: the Communist Party, which 'strives towards the social revolution and precisely because of this supports concurrently every movement, however partial, of the toilers against the exploiters and against the bourgeois state'; the reformists, who wish to make compromises with the system, but in order to retain a mass following are sometimes 'compelled to support the partial movements of the exploited against the exploiters';

and, finally, the 'centrists, who vacillate between these two'.

To the argument that communists could call for united fronts 'from below' - that is, to reject formal co-operation with union leaders and reformists by appealing directly to workers - Trotsky replied: 'If we were simply able to unite the working masses around our own banner or our own immediate slogans, and skip over the reformist organisations, whether party or trade union, that would, of course, be the best thing in the world. But then, the very question of the united front would not exist in the present form.'

In conclusion, Numsa has raised fundamental questions in their SNC of 17 to 20 December 2013 in Boksburg, Gauteng. The key focus areas that were discussed based on the declaration document are:

- The NDP
- Cosatu Crisis
- Marikana
- SACP as the Vanguard Party
 - The South African Communist Party (SACP) leadership has become

embedded in the state and is failing to act as the vanguard of the working class. The chance of winning it back onto the path of working-class struggle for working-class power is very remote.

- Explore the establishment of a Movement for Socialism
- Support of the ANC in the elections
- Cosatu Special Congress
- Nkandla awaited report.

These are issues that need to be discussed by various left formations and communities in support of Numsa's initiative for the betterment of the working class and there should also be follow-up political sessions within Numsa to further engage with these resolutions. ¹⁸

'If real development is to take place, the people have to be involved' - Julius Kambarage 'Mwalimu' Nyerere.

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