

Academics organise

The Union of Democratic University Staff Association (UDUSA) recently held its second National Congress. *Labour Bulletin* interviewed UDUSA General Secretary, MIKE MORRIS.

Labour Bulletin: *UDUSA was launched in July 1988 and had its second congress this July. It now has over 4 000 members and branches at 18 different universities. Why was it formed?*

Mike Morris: The impetus for the formation of UDUSA came from a variety of sources. On the one hand there was a push from academics on the liberal universities. Progressive academics thought it was necessary to take a much harder position on state repression. They also began to identify much more with the conditions on black campuses and felt the only way to cope was through organisation.

The second impetus came from the black universities. There were a number of academics at these universities who were highly suspicious of the white liberal universities, but realised that the only way to put the problems of the black universities on the na-

tional agenda for academics was through a national organisation. They therefore felt that it was necessary to link up with progressive academics at the liberal universities.

A third impetus came from the academic boycott. This was a major problem for many academics. It was quite apparent to some of us that we could only sort out the problem if we dealt with it in organisational as opposed to an individual way. It would also require us to make an organisational commitment to the struggle against apartheid, and that required a mass organisation.

There were other impetuses that came from the deteriorating salaries and conditions of service at various universities. You can't deal with that in any other way than by taking on the Department of National Education and the Committee of University Principals in a national way through organisation.

Labour Bulletin: *Do you see yourselves as essentially a trade union of academics?*

Mike Morris: I don't think that it would be correct to describe UDUSA as a trade union. It is very hard to organise academics into a trade union. Academics have their own historical academic traditions that make them baulk at the idea of being a trade union.

We see ourselves rather as a national political association which pulls together progressive academics at various universities and in the process takes up a variety of political, educational and bread and butter issues.

The second reason why we wouldn't call ourselves a trade union is that we have a particular structure which allows staff associations at universities to affiliate directly to UDUSA.

Labour Bulletin: *So what would you see as your main aim?*

Mike Morris: Our main aim is to do what we have done, and that is to bring progressive academics at various universities into a broad anti-apartheid national organisation; to attempt to get a coherent political profile and political line on a national basis; to formulate programmes of action which we shall try to implement in the various universities; and to allow other organisations both national and international to relate to academics as part of the struggle against apartheid.

Labour Bulletin: *So what are your plans over the next year?*

Mike Morris: At our last congress we took up three major themes in terms of a campaign of action. These arose from our own deliberations. In our discussions with the ANC it became quite clear to us that we needed to be much more specific about what we were doing.

The first campaign is democratisation and transformation of the universities. We have a whole lot of issues around democratising and transforming the structures of the universities; changing the racial division of staff and students; dealing with the question of sexual and racial harassment and discrimination.

The second campaign we have launched is against state repression at universities and tertiary education in general. The main issue that we will take up here is exposing state and administrative repression at various universities. The obvious example is Turfloop, which is more of an SADF camp where some education takes place, than a university that is sometimes invaded by the SADF.

We would also like to take up the question of university administrations abusing their own power, and discriminating against staff and students. We aim to protest against victimisation of our members and build solidarity amongst universities to assist those UDUSA members on campuses where there is much less freedom of expression.

The last campaign we are launch-



Turfloop - more like an armed camp than a university

Photo: Steve Hilton-Barber/Afrapix

ing is to build UDUSA's organisation and strengthen it.

Labour Bulletin: *What would you see as your most significant achievement to date?*

Mike Morris: I think our main achievement is not something you can actually see. The most significant achievement is managing to break

down the suspicion and barriers that exist between intellectuals and academics at black universities, intellectuals at Afrikaans universities and at the English-speaking universities, as well as University of Durban Westville and University of the Western Cape.

Labour Bulletin: *Would you comment on the recent visit to Lusaka of an UDUSA delegation composed of delegates from Afrikaans universities, black universities and the so-called liberal universities?*

Mike Morris: I think it was a very fruitful visit. We embarked upon that visit because at our founding congress we took a decision to consult a variety of organisations. We had met with the Minister of National Education to put our point of view across and we felt it was very, very important for us to go as soon as possible to discuss matter with the ANC as well. In any case, our political sympathies lie much closer with those engaged with the liberation struggle than with the Minister of National Education. The visit was very useful, and constructive. The ANC treated us very well. They were very sympathetic to the aims of UDUSA and they gave us the greatest encouragement in our project of organising the intelligentsia in this country.

On the question of the academic exchange, it is a very difficult issue and we have taken a long time to discuss it and the academic boycott. We have taken a year to discuss the matter, and

we have come up with some positions. We put our position of 'selective support' - that is, isolate the regime and support academics who oppose apartheid - to the ANC, and they felt this was quite in tune with their own thinking. They left it to us to carry on our discussions with other organisations inside the country and see if we can formulate an internal position around 'selective support'. Then we can take the matter further.

Labour Bulletin: *Does UDUSA see itself as part of the Mass Democratic Movement in South Africa?*

Mike Morris: UDUSA definitely sees itself as part of the forces in opposition to apartheid.

Labour Bulletin: *What role do you see yourselves being able to play in the broader struggles that are waged by workers in South Africa?*

Mike Morris: On the specific issue of workers there is a particular problem that we have that puts us in a partial relationship to COSATU and NACTU. I say partial because we don't want to pretend we are going to deliver a lot of goods on the matter. The problem that academics have is that the recent Labour Relations Act excluded us from its provisions.

We regard ourselves as employees, albeit intellectual workers of a particular kind, who require access to legislative machinery and negotiating procedures to resolve some of our individual and collective grievances. So

we see ourselves as having similar aims to COSATU and NACTU in this regard when they call for all workers to be under a Labour Relations Act which is significantly modified from the Act we have currently.

Labour Bulletin: *What about the issue that is facing other public sector workers, that of rationalisation. Are you experiencing that at universities and how is UDUSA going to respond to it?*

Mike Morris: Rationalisation and privatisation is a problem for us. We do not have a relationship with any other public sector workers on this issue. I think our situation is slightly different from theirs, but it is a major problem because the state in coping with their own fiscal crisis, is squeezing the university financially. The government is pushing us quite radically into a restructuring of the universities in a technical kind of way.

We see that we have a major role to play in preserving the intellectual traditions of our society, particularly for the decades to come ahead when we will have to give a major intellectual input into restructuring and reorganising society in a more democratic way.

Labour Bulletin: *What role do you see progressive academics playing during this period of transition?*

Mike Morris: One of the interesting discussions that we had in Lusaka



A familiar scene - academics and students confronting the police

Photo: Dave Hartman/Afrapix

with the ANC was around the organisation of the intelligentsia and the future role of the intelligentsia. Where I think we were in major agreement was that it is absolutely essential to encourage the committed intelligentsia in this country to stay and make a contribution to change in the troubled years that lie ahead of us, and to help construct a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

What this specifically means for us is that we have to proceed with the job that we have at the universities themselves. We have to produce a generation of technically competent, committed, non-racial intellectuals who can help to construct a society that is not only non-racial but is more justly organised.

Labour Bulletin: *Could you comment about your links with intellectuals in other countries?*

Mike Morris: We have attempted to speak to a number of teachers' organisations, university organisations, and staff organisations internationally. We have received a very good response from them because for the first time it has enabled them to relate to a progressive internal academic organisation in this country.

If that doesn't happen then they are faced with the prospect of having to condemn and isolate all intellectuals in South Africa and treat them as being on the side of reaction.

By the formation of UDUSA we are able to not only project ourselves into the national arena for change, but are also able to relate internationally to intellectuals, academics and university staff, as well as to anti-apartheid movements overseas who are just as committed as we are to produce a non-racial, democratic South Africa. ☆