

Errors of workerism

As part of the ongoing debate which existed between the so-called workerists and populists, the UDF publication **Isizwe** wrote a rather critical article on the 'errors' of workerism which was seen to emerge from a group of mainly white intellectuals who became involved in the emerging union movement in the early 1970s.

Workerism is an ideology that has existed at different times and different parts of the world. In the late 19th century and early 20th century workerism was one of the false approaches that the new international workers movement had to deal with and criticise. There were many important debates within workers' parties, unions and later with national liberation movements concerning workerism.

As the name shows, workerism concentrates more on the working class. Workerism correctly states that this class is the most progressive class in capitalist societies. Depending on the time or place, workerism has some or all of the following features. In the first place workerism is suspicious of all issues that are not 'pure' working class issues. What is more, workerism tends to have a very narrow idea of working class concerns; it tends to think mainly of factory-based struggles over wages and working conditions. Insofar as other issues, beyond the point of production (beyond the factory) are taken up, these are seen as secondary matters. This means that workerists tend to under-rate the very important struggle for state power.

Workerism also tends to be highly suspicious of any kind of popular alliance, and of any struggle that involves more than just the working class. In fact nowhere in the world has the working class achieved victory without a large number of allies among other groups. In the last 10 to 15 years we have seen the emergence of a fairly strong workerist current in SA.

RE-EMERGENCE OF PROGRESSIVE UNIONS

In considering the development of workerism, the group of young intellectuals, many white, coming from the universities (who were the main participants in the emerging union movement in the 1970s) needs to be looked at more closely. These young intellectuals made an important contribution in the early years of rebuilding progressive trade unions. They assisted with advice, research and organisational skills. The ideological background of many of these intellectuals was an academic or legal Marxism.

This brand of Marxism had been learnt from university books, and not been sharpened or tested in mass struggle. Of course this was not the fault of the

intellectuals in question. It was not easy for them to have developed progressive ideas, except through small reading groups in the heavy repression of the early 1970s. This academic Marxism was very European in character. It was not rooted in the SA struggle. As mass union organisation grew in the late 1970s some intellectuals in this group changed and deepened their outlook. They came to understand the history of our struggle, its traditions, and its strategies and tactics. But the outlook of some others continued to be heavily marked by their university background. It was this last group that became the most active ideologists of workerism.

DEBATES WITHIN THE UNION

A number of debates happened in the mid 1970s in and around the new trade unions. One debate concerned the question of unions and political involvement; some argued that the re-emerged unions should not get involved in politics. They said that unions' best chance of survival and of growth were to concentrate narrowly on labour issues. We must remember in this period of the early 1970s the apartheid regime and the bosses were going all out to smash the new emerging unions. After the mass countryside struggles of 1976-1977, the apartheid government retreated on the union front. The government and the bosses were scared that the popular militancy, especially of the youth would 'infect' the new union movement.

For some workerists this was seen as a victory for the strategy of narrow trade union work, by slowly pushing back the government and bosses by the careful building of trade union structures, and by not getting involved in political adventures.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF WORKERISM

There have been three broad forms of



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workerism in SA over the last 15 years.

Workerism as economism - We have already spoken of 1973 and the debates that surrounded the new trade unions. The debates were whether the unions should get involved in politics. Some, but not all intellectuals associated with trade unions argued that the unions should not get involved. Generally, at this stage this view was presented as a tactic for the particular time. It was, as we have said, a period when the unions were still weak and small. But many of those pushing this tactic of independence for unions in the early 1970's soon began to develop a more elaborated theory - this was the ideology of economism, by economism we mean that brand of workerism that has argued that the economy is the key to everything. This position argues that in a capitalist economy like South Africa everything can be explained by capitalist relations of production - that is, by the exploitation of workers by bosses.

Workerists who advance this brand of economism tend to dismiss the political

struggle as not important. They see apartheid oppression as simply a mask behind which capitalist exploitation is hidden. It is true that the power of the ruling class, of the bosses rests very much at the exploitation of workers at the point of production. Full democracy for South Africa depends importantly on removing exploitation from our economy. But economism takes these truths and turns them in to the whole truth. In this way it tends to ignore the great importance of political questions.

Workerism as syndicalism - This syndicalist brand of workerism does not deny the needs for workers to get involved in wider political issues. But it sees the trade union as the main or even the only organisational base for this political involvement.

So far, we have considered two brands of workerism - economism and syndicalism. We have suggested that these forms of workerism have been closely associated with certain intellectuals linked to the trade union movement. The soil for the development of this workerist has been a trade union

movement emerging in the absence of a large open political organisation. But the errors of workerism are not confined to some of those who have been closely associated with the trade unions over the last period. There is a third, watered down version of workerism that exists within the ranks of the UDF and elsewhere. This brand of workerism shares many of the errors of other brands of workerism, but in a watered down not so strong form. It is those who pay lip service to the broad strategy of the national democratic struggle. For these watered down workerists the national democratic struggle is simply a tactic of the moment. For them the broad front of the UDF is an unfortunate and temporary structure, and they would like to see the UDF become a socialist, workers' party. They would like to see the petty bourgeoisie and all those democrats who are not socialist 'weeded out' from our ranks.

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