

## *Politics and unions*

“**T**hroughout our history, the progressive trade union movement has been part of our movement for national liberation. This had to be so because the black working class was also oppressed as part of the black people, with its class interests refracted through the prism of national oppression, as was the case in all other colonies. In time, its political interests were articulated and represented by the ANC as the leader of the liberation movement.

Again, for many decades, many of the leaders of the progressive trade union movement were drawn from the ANC and the SACP, enabling this combination to act as the political representative of both the organised and unorganised black and progressive workers.

During the years of illegality for both these political formations, and as the progressive trade union movement recovered from the period of extreme repression, it had no possibility fully to access some elements of this tradition and the organised representatives of that experience.

One of the consequences of this was that, for the first time since the days of the ICU [Industrial and Commercial Workers Union], the progressive trade union movement evolved its own political leadership as oppressed to accepting a political leadership drawn from political formations representative of the views and aspirations of the members of the unions. It is one of

*In his report to the recent ANC National Conference, President Mandela raised questions about the role and function of the labour movement in the current period.*

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the great strengths of our broad movement that many of these leaders were subsequently drawn into the ranks of the ANC because this leader of our liberation movement championed a cause which found a ready response among workers who, daily and directly, experienced the effect of national oppression.

### **Alternative formation**

Regardless of this, some of these leaders have never been able to find a home within the political organisations of the national democratic movement. Effectively, they have therefore treated the trade union movement as an alternative political formation through which they would pursue both their trade union and political aspirations.

The particular historical circumstance of the formation of a political leadership corps, representative of a particular section of our society, has manifested itself in the last three years at various moments and in various ways, with COSATU doing more than



represent the mere trade union interests of its members.

Some of what we must have learnt over the last three years is that our victory over the apartheid regime created the possibility for some among the trade union political leadership to assert this leadership role, *separate and apart from and, in some instances, in contradiction with the rest of the political leadership of our broad democratic movement.*

Necessarily the questions arise in our own country, as they have done in other countries before - *what are the unique political interests of that section of the working class which is organised into unions, which result in the adoption of a complex of political demands and the birth of a unique trade union political leadership, respectively separate and different from the demands and the leadership of political formations which would normally represent these workers in the sphere of politics?*

Workers correctly combine in trade unions around the question of their direct material interest. Thus, the grassroots level of leadership of any trade union is composed of shopstewards, whose daily activity focuses on wages, conditions of work and interaction on the shopfloor, without regard to the political allegiances of either the workers or the management.

Naturally, this particular focus is correctly reproduced at higher levels of any trade union. Accordingly, such political leadership as the unions evolve, will in good measure be distinguished as a distinct echelon by its exclusive dedication to the advancement of these material interests, which process is rendered political by the extension of the historic mandate of a trade union leadership beyond the shopfloor to the political sphere, in all its elements.

The simplest of analyses will show how, in the last three years, some among the

leadership of the trade unions has sought to play this political role, resulting in an inevitable and sometimes strident conflict and contest between itself and the rest of the leadership of the democratic movement. But the question must be answered as to why, in certain instances, the positions and activity of this trade union political leadership result in an evitable conflict with the leadership of the rest of the democratic movement.

### Framework

If we deal with the Progressive Alliance, we can say that the answer to this question derives from the reality that neither the ANC nor the SACP can act as the political representatives solely and merely of the progressive, organised and employed section of the working class, which sections of the working class some of the political leadership of the unions can justifiably and correctly claim to represent.

The ANC represents the people as a whole, and the African working masses in particular. The SACP would see itself as representing the working class in general, and the African workers in particular, *whether organised and employed or not.* This encapsulates the objective basis for the differences among the different formations which constitute the Progressive Alliance and provides the general framework which enables us to understand and resolve some of the differences within this Alliance we have experienced over the last three years.

Objectively, the employed and organised workers in our country occupy a particular social position which is different from the social position occupied by the unemployed.

With regards to the latter, they are in a relatively privileged position. Because of its place in social production and its organised strength, this section of the working class





has the possibility and the duty to itself:

- ❑ to fight to advance its own interests;
- ❑ to bargain for itself, in opposition to the demands of all other sectors of society, including the unemployed and the non-unionised; and
- ❑ to battle for the hegemony of its interests, regardless of what the progressive political movements might consider as being 'in the interests of the national democratic movement'.

From this it must follow that the unique intervention in the political sphere of some of the political leadership emanating exclusively from this employed and organised sector of our working class, will necessarily focus on the promotion of the interests of what, in relation to the unemployed and the employed but non-

unionised, are those of the relatively privileged. Conference must discuss the impact of this on the cohesion of the Progressive Alliance. Consequently, we must deal with the complex question of the interconnection between the role of the progressive unions as representatives of the interests of their members, and the role of these unions as an important component part of the progressive movement for the fundamental social transformation of our society. Our experience over the last three years demonstrates that the two do not necessarily mean the same thing" ★

*This is a verbatim extract from the 'Political report of the President, Nelson Mandela' to the ANC 50<sup>th</sup> National Conference, 16-20 December 1997.*