

Role of unions in politics

The GWU on the UDF

Former GWU official, Terror Lekota urged unions to affiliate to the UDF.



1974-1983

Some controversy emerged after a number of unions indicated that they would support the UDF, but would not affiliate. The following is an edited version of an interview with the general secretary of the GWU Dave Lewis.

Why has the GWU decided not to affiliate to the UDF?

We are committed to supporting any organisation, which opposes the constitutional proposals and the Koornhof Bills, and the UDF would obviously be primary amongst those organisations. We are also committed to the idea of joint campaigns but we do not see our way clear to affiliating to the UDF. The first concern relates to the structure of those organisations affiliated to the UDF, relative to the structure of a union. These structures are very distinct and critically different. The second concern relates to the working class nature of unions relative to the multi-class nature of the UDF and many of the organisations affiliated to the UDF.

What are the differences in structure and why do these differences present an obstacle to affiliation?

Unions have specific structures and one union can easily lock into another at all levels in the organisation. That is not the case with many of the organisations affiliated to the UDF. Take for example, the Detainees Parents Support Committee, it does not bear any similarity to

the structure of a union. The majority of these organisations are organisations of activists and are referred to as mass-based organisations. As we see it, an activist organisation is essentially a grouping of like-minded individuals who are brought together by a common political goal. Their activities consist in propagating their ideas amongst a constituency, which they themselves define. Activists grouped together in this way, in an organisation of this sort, have a great deal of freedom to manoeuvre in the extremely flexible parameters in which they operate. They do not represent members in a strong sense. They propagate ideas amongst a certain constituency or in a certain area and as such play a very important political role. Unions on the other hand are not organisations of activists and union leaders are not activists in the same sense at all, because they are representatives in the strongest sense. Union leaders do not claim to represent the views of the working class. They represent the views of their members. They have to be mandated by workers in a factory and have to be reasonably sure that the particular workers who have mandated them back up their mandate. The critical issue is that a union representative has to go through a long and very arduous process of receiving mandates and constantly ensuring that the mandates are backed. These considerations do not apply to a large number of the organisations affiliated to the UDF who have as their legitimate political task, to appeal to the masses 'out there'. We have as our task the representation of the workers inside our organisation and the painstaking process of drawing more and more members into the formal and discipline structure of a union. This is a major reason why we found it difficult to envisage fitting into the structure of the UDF.

Could you elaborate on the relationship between a single class organisation such as a union and a multi-class organisation such as

the UDF?

It is not a question of a union being a single-class organisation but rather that a union is a working class organisation. This means that they identify as their source of oppression, the bosses and the state. That has bearing on the question of affiliation to the UDF. For one thing, we will inevitably be organisations that incorporate a great diversity of political views and affiliations... We do not want to get into a detailed critique of the UDF as such. But the UDF has to ask itself whether its style and tone, whether the language spoken, whether the pace at which it developed, whether its programme, facilitate the fullest participation by working class people. Our members simply do not feel that way.

There is a lot of talk about the importance of working class leadership in national political organisations, what are your views?

It is essential that working class individuals occupy leading positions in national political organisations. It is important because workers must have a special status in multi-class organisations. Workers must have the opportunity to lead the pace, style, tone and language, in fact the whole discourse of the organisation. Democracy in this country is inconceivable without the fullest participation of workers in the national democratic struggle. This is not merely because the working class is the largest and most muscular group in society. Simply put, they are the only social grouping with a class interest in democracy. Other social classes or social groupings might have an interest in relative or partial democratisation of society; other individuals might have a moral interest in a thorough-going democratisation of society. However, the working class is the one class in society that has an interest in a proper democratisation of the economy and the polity.

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The full interview appeared in the November 1983 edition of the Bulletin.