

# The unions and the UDF

Everything was contested and debated as was the case of the relationship between unions and mass-based organisations such as the UDF. **Sisa Njikelana** responds to Dave Lewis of the GWU with regard to the participation of working class formations such as unions in the UDF.



**G**iven that the state is preparing to introduce the new constitution in an attempt to co-opt sections of the oppressed majority and halt the advance being made in the struggle for democratic South Africa, it is of vital importance that every effort be made to strengthen and develop the democratic trade union movement and to reject any attempts to isolate workers from the National Democratic Struggle.

With the above in mind, it is necessary that a contribution be made in response to the views expressed by the GWU.

## CLASS ALLIANCES

Certain points need to be made with regard to the issues of class alliances, which seems to underlie much of this debate.

From our experiences in struggle we know that an individual or group's political actions, in terms of what position they adopt, do not automatically correspond to the ultimate interests of their class. Rather, they assume positions, which at any given moment, to some degree, depend on political, ideological and historical factors. It is therefore important to note that continuing national oppression and its

resultant limitations, insecurity and deprivation, is continually felt by every class and group within the black community.

While the state is attempting, through various concessions, to co-opt groups and individuals within the black community, we must be careful in our endeavours to unite our people for liberation, not to allow positions to be adopted which might push them unwittingly, into the state's camp.

We also have to recognise that there are those whose experience or awareness of national oppression and economic exploitation will prevent them from going all

the way in accepting cooption and/or collaboration with the state. These people must constantly be encouraged to play their part in the struggle for national liberation. With this firmly in mind it becomes all the more important that the black working class as the most determined and consistent force in the struggle for national liberation, must lead the way forward.

### WHY A BROAD DEMOCRATIC FRONT?

A front is an alliance of a broad spectrum of autonomous organisations of differing class origins that come together having identified a common political grievance.

The representative of affiliate organisations of a broad front democratically decides the direction of the front. For instance, if a union or any other organisation feels it cannot take part in a particular campaign, it would make its opposition or inability known. This threatened abstention, hence the weakening of the campaign, requires a compromise to be forged in order that the broadest unity in taking up the specific political issue at stake be secured. If no compromise is reached the front faces a dilemma and the campaign may fail.

### TRADE UNIONS: A PARTICULAR ORGANISATIONAL FORM

Much has been made of the 'critical' differences between a trade union as an organisational form and other forms of organisation. Trade unions it is said 'to all intents and purposes have identical structures'. This may be the case but to follow this by asserting 'this is, as far as we see it, what a mass-based organisation means', raises a number of questions.

It must be noted that the organisational form within which any mass-based organisation operates is related to the specific conditions in which such an organisation develops. The concentration of workers within a single factory, creates the conditions under which unionists organise. Although it may be desirable that community women's, student and other organisations establish formal structures, this is not always possible. It would be unreal to insist that a student organisation establish formal branch structures from

classroom to classroom and school to school in a historical situation where student organisations are banned from the schools. For a community organisation to have a committee in each street may be the ideal, but under certain conditions this is extremely difficult to accomplish. To say as a result that a community organisation does not have a mass base is totally out of touch with the realities of the environment in which that organiser is working.

The mass base of organisations which are unable to issue membership cards, collect dues, have dues deducted, pay full-time organisers and operate through formal structures, can only be assessed according to the support their programmes enjoy.

Although it is recognised by Lewis that unions do have other elements within them which 'influence the mandate that is given', it is asserted that they will always 'represent the views of their members'. Again it is affirmed that 'unions will inevitably be organisations that incorporate a great diversity of political views, ... members within militant political views, and ... members with fairly conservative political views'. And yet it is asserted that 'workers' and by inference the trade unions themselves 'must have a special status in multi-class organisations'.

This implied claim by certain trade union leadership to 'special status' within multi-class organisations needs to be carefully examined. It is questionable whether trade unions, with their accepted ambiguities, will represent the interest of the working class any better or more thoroughly than community organisations based within the residential areas of the same workers who are members of the trade unions.

To conflate the working class within union membership is to confine the membership of the working class to union membership only, to the exclusion of dependants (husbands, wives, elderly parents and children) of those union members. Non-unionised workers and the unemployed constitute a vast portion of the working class. The community, women's, student, youth and other organisations based within working class communities, are also in a position to express the views of the working class and are also legitimate organisations

of the working class.

The distinctions between trade union struggles and struggles engaged in by other mass based organisations has tended to be exaggerated in an attempt to show that the economic struggles waged by the unions are far more real and working class in nature than other mass based struggles. How real is this distinction? Are workers' struggles for higher wages so unrelated to rent boycotts or bus boycotts? Even those community and other struggles which are not so clearly economically based, such as those waged in the schools for a free and better education system, are issues which directly affect the working class.

### TRADE UNIONS AND THE BROAD DEMOCRATIC FRONT

What is the role of trade unions in relations to the UDF and its affiliates organisations? The starting point of any programme aimed at securing fundamental changes in society must be an understanding of who the main enemy is and which is the principal social grouping and its allies on the side of the struggle for such fundamental social change. Looking to other revolutionary experiences such as those in Vietnam and Nicaragua, teaches us that the progressive forces drew the broad strata of the population into the revolutionary struggle. The working class did not become the leading force of the broad democratic front spontaneously, nor demand that workers must have the opportunity to lead the pace and style and tone and language - in fact the whole discourse - of the organisation.

The mere presence of the unions, or of individual members of the unions who are 'encouraged' to take part in the broad democratic front is going to guarantee that the front expresses the view of the working class or has working class leadership. The only way the working class can lead the broad democratic front as learnt in the experiences of other struggles is through active participation within the organisations and structures of the broad democratic front.

LB

*This is an edited version of an article written by Njikelana in his personal capacity, in June 1984 in the Labour Bulletin.*