

UDF B COMMISSION REPORT

1. Introduction

The launching of the United Democratic Front in August 1984 represented the most significant display of non-racial unity in opposition to apartheid for the last 20 years. The formation of the front, consisting of several hundred organisations was a concerted response to the National Government's reform initiatives, in particular the implementation of the New Constitution and the Koornhof bills.

The 15 months since the inception have been characterised by a massive growth in support, organisation and strength of the front. 1984 has seen campaigns spearheaded by the UDF culminate in a mass rejection of both the community council system and the tricameral parliament.

Our involvement in the front has ushered NUSAS into a new era of opposition to apartheid. With this in mind the committee session aimed at analysing the the UDF's impact on our organisational activity and direction in order to draw conclusions for the year ahead.

Since the NUSAS campaign in response to the white referendum in November 1983, we have embarked extensively on several UDF related campaigns on our campuses. Most important were the UDF million signature and anti tricameral election campaign.

At the same time our off campus activity has increased dramatically serving alongside other progressive organisations on many UDF committees and other ad hoc structures. We have at times also participated actively in their off campus activities and campaigns.

2. Impact on campus

We examined the impact of UDF related campaigns on campus on three different levels:

1. Were we able to counter government reform initiatives?

It was felt that our campaigns focussed almost exclusively on the New Constitution and the Tricameral Parliament. The government reform initiatives were successfully discredited in the eyes of students by a combination of our efforts and commercial media coverage of the massive rejection of the constitution and the subsequent unrest. The new deal is not seen as a solution to the fundamental problems facing SA.

Due to the concentration on the elections, focus on the entire range of reform initiatives was neglected. Students do not necessarily have an understanding of the broader components of the new deal eg Aliens Bill etc

2. What is the extent of support for UDF?

This is difficult to assess accurately. Rejection of the New Deal does not automatically imply support for UDF. While there is an awareness of UDF as a major opposition force it is not readily perceived as an alternative with which white students can associate. Our particular concentration on UDF neglected extensive explanation of the nature of the front, the significance of the broad base of its affiliates and the ideas it represents.

It was also felt that we need to more effectively counter government and right wing smear attacks on the front.

2.

3. How do students view extra-parliamentary opposition?

Students do not necessarily understand the role or significance of extra-parliamentary opposition as a force for change. We need to explain the history, nature and direction of resistance arising from the educational institutions, the factors and the communities and the underlying principles of non-racialism and democracy and its implications for white students. This is important in order to allay the fears and suspicions felt by some students towards what they perceive as a new and militant form of organisation.

IMPACT ON OUR ORGANISATION

a. On campus activity

High Profile

Our involvement with UDF has affected our programmes and the manner in which we are perceived by students. We have been pre-occupied with high profile, exhausting activity around national political issues and issues affecting regional UDF affiliates. This led to an assumption that the level of student understanding of and opposition to apartheid was higher than could in reality be attributed to our campaign and activities.

Internally

Intensification of activity especially around the election period, drained organisational capacity. This caused us at times to neglect ground level campus work and consolidation and growth of arguments as regards both education and the incorporation of interested students.

Gains

Our programmes on campus were enhanced by UDF providing a tangible embodiment of the non-racial movement in action that we have spoken of but are now able to point to. At the same time student opposition to apartheid has been placed in the context of an alliance with all democratic South Africans as components of one movement for change.

AZASO

Focus on common issues led to close cooperation with AZASO. Although this was not without its problems, our association with AZASO has consolidated providing an important vision of non racialism on campus.

The outline, did however serve to radicalise high profile activity and where solid groundwork was absent its appeal to white students was limited. A possible cost of this alliance was that we failed to put energy into building alliances with other white sectors on campus as a result reducing the potential broadness of our appeal

b. OFF CAMPUS ACTIVITY

Context

There has been a dramatic increase in contact with other progressive organisations linked by UDF structures. This has created for us a deeper understanding of the national democratic movement and increased our sense of active participation within it. We have been able to locate our opposition to apartheid on campus within a broad perspective and to confront crucial issues such as non racialism in practice

3.

(language barriers etc) the overall effect has been to strengthen the experience and skills of active students within our structures.

Indirect

This contact, however remains for most actively involved students. Students must be given to the process of information flow and report back if we are to ensure full benefit to organisation.

Time Consuming

The nature of off campus contact and activity has proved particularly time consuming. This has led us at times, to neglect our overall programme on campus. Although 1985 is unlikely to bring with it the campaigns of this year, off campus commitments are likely to remain demanding.

Exams

Our structured commitment to exams served to limit our contribution during periods when it was sorely needed.

Intimidation

Our involvement with the UDF has brought with it an increase in state harassment of our students. Activities such as pamphleteering, house to house visits, signature collecting and election day work were accompanied by assaults, teargassing, arrests and sjambokkings. Combined with Le Grange's threatening statements and increased parental pressure, it becomes all the more important to consolidate our experiences in order to strengthen the resolve of students.

CONCLUSION

A number of points can be made in conclusion to bear in mind for the coming year:
- The, as yet undecided future direction and programmes of the UDF will affect our activity and the way in which we are perceived on campus. This must be constantly examined and assessed.

- We must be aware of the dangers of restricting our campus education activity to UDF related campaigns and issues
- There is a need to conscientiously ^{explain} the significance and nature of extra parliamentary opposition to students and to present alternatives. The activities of the past year have highlighted various clauses of the Freedom Charter (Doors of learning and cluture , Peace and Friendship and the People shall govern)
This has laid the basis for extensive focus on the Freedom Charter as the political alternative to the Government's new deal
- increased militancy around high profile activity needs to be tempered by careful and systematic education of the issues at hand
- we must ensure that campus priorities are not neglected as a result of increased contact with broader progressive organisations.