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Errors of Workerism

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Workerism is an ideology that has existed at different times in 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 criticize. There were many important debates within workers' parties, trade unions and later with national liberation movements concerning workerism. We in South Africa can learn a great deal from a study of these historical criticisms. In this article we will be more concerned with local versions of workerism.

As the name shows, workerism concentrates more or less narrowly on the working class. Workerism correctly states that this class is the most progressive class in capitalist societies. But workerism then clings to this truth in a very mechanical, one-sided way.

Depending on the time or place, workerism has some or all of the following features. In the first place it is suspicious of all issues that are not "pure" working class issues. What is more, the approach 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. These are the really important problems for workerism. Insofar as other issues, beyond the point of production (beyond the factory) are taken up, these are seen as secondary matters. This means that workerism tends to under-rate the very important struggle for state power. By state power we mean control over the police, army, courts, parliament and administration.

Workerism also tends to be highly suspicious of any kind of popular alliance and any struggle that involves more than just the working class. In fact nowhere in the world has the working class achieved victory without large numbers of allies among other groups. Where the working class has won power, it has always had to fight against the ideology of workerism, which seeks to isolate the workers.

Despite this history, and despite many examples of its weaknesses, workerism still lifts its head from time to time.

In the last 10 to 15 years we have seen the emergence of a fairly strong workerist current in South Africa. Before we look more closely at this tendency, we need to understand the particular, historical conditions that made this development possible.

RE-EMERGENCE OF PROGRESSIVE TRADE UNIONS.

It was the progressive trade unions that were the first genuine mass-based, progressive organizations to emerge in South Africa after the terrible repression of the 1960's. The beginnings of this re-emergence date back to 1973. In that year a 100 000 workers went on strike in the Durban area. This wave of strikes set the pace. Unions began to re-emerge over the next years in all the major urban centers.

The main participants in these developments were:

- The workers themselves
- Veteran workers leaders from the earlier SACTU period some of whom at that time had recently been released from political imprisonment; and
- Young intellectuals, many (but not all) white, coming from the universities.

In considering the development of workerism, this third group 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, resources and organizational 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 and tested in mass struggle. (Of course this was not the fault of the intellectuals in question. It was not easy for them to develop progressive ideas, except through small reading groups in the heavy repression of the early 1970’s). This “academic marxism” was very European in character. It was not rooted in the South African struggle.

Looking back, one person from that time has said: “I read many thick Marxist books. They were about Britain and France. I knew all about difficult economic theories before I had even heard about the Freedom Charter, or of SACTU’s pound-a-day campaign of the 1950’s.”

As mass union organization grew in the late 1970’s, 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 TRADE UNIONS

A number of debates happened in the mid 1970’s in and around the new trade unions. One debate concerned the question of trade unions and political involvement. Some argued that the re-emerged trade unions should not get involved in politics. They said that trade unions’ best chance of survival and of growth was to concentrate narrowly on labour issues.

We must remember in this period of the early 1970’s, the apartheid regime and the bosses were going all out to smash the new emerging trade unions. They were trying to impose instead dummy liaison committees. At this time, the progressive trade unions were quite small and inexperienced.

After the massive country wide struggles 1976-1977, the apartheid government retreated on the trade union front. The government and the bosses were scared that the popular militancy, especially of the youth, would “infect” the new trade union movement.

The ruling class abandoned the liaison committees and went for a different approach. They decided to recognize the new trade unions, and in this way they hoped to tame them. They hoped that by recognizing the trade unions it would keep them free from politics.

In fact, this new approach did not really work. Instead it made a lot more space for progressive trade union work. It was, in practice, an important victory for the South African working class and its organizations.

For some workerists, this victory 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.” Of course what argument this completely ignores is the massive effect that the 1976-1977 uprisings had on forcing the apartheid government and bosses back into making some reforms. Over 1000 people, mostly students and young workers, died in the struggles of 1976-77. The emerging trade union movement is one of the living monuments to these martyrs.

This newly opened space on the labour front was used effectively by the workers and their trade union leadership. By 1979, a new national trade union federation, FOSATU, was launched. Alongside FOSATU, SAAWU and many other trade union also grew in strength.

The main feature of this short background history is that the working class movement re-emerged largely as a trade union movement.

This happened in a situation where there was little, if any, open mass-based political organizations in the people’s camp. It was only in the early 1980’s that progressive civics, youth congresses and women’s organizations began to emerge. It was only in August 1983, with the launch of the UDF, that a truly national, political voice existed at an open level. By this stage, the re-emerged trade union movement had been in existence for some 10 years. It was in this situation, with a labour movement operating more or less independently of mass political struggle, that workerism developed.

A WARNING

A word of warning before we look more closely at the details of workerism. Too often we use the words “populism” and “workerism” as loose, sectarian slogans. Too often we label someone, or some group or organization “workerist” and then we imagine we can dismiss them. But this is not so.

In fact, individuals and organizations with workerist tendencies have made contributions to our struggle in the last 15 years. In criticizing the errors of workerism, we must also learn what we can from the strong points in theory and in organization of those who have workerist tendencies. We must seek to win them over to our position.

It is also important to note that when we use the word “tendency,” we mean exactly that. Today you will find only a few pure workerists. But you will find the outlook and errors of workerism creeping in as a tendency in quite a few places. Our own UDF ranks have not been free of workerist tendencies.

There have been three broad forms of workerism in South Africa over the last 15 years.

1. 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. It is possible that this low profile, narrow trade union, factory floor approach was, then, the correct tactic. In any case,

as long as this approach was seen, strictly, as a tactic and not as a general principle, then it is not really correct to describe it as workerism.

But many of those pushing this tactic of “independence” for trade 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.

Now, there is a lot of truth in this view. Unfortunately, this important truth is advanced by economism as if it were the whole truth, and the only truth. As a result, it argues that the only real important struggle is on the factory floor. It is in the factory that the workers and bosses confront each other most purely. This struggle is the key to everything else.

Workerists who advance this brand of economism tend to dismiss the political struggle as not so important. They see apartheid oppression as simply a mask behind which capitalist exploitation is hidden. For these workerists, struggles around who shall govern, and against apartheid oppression generally are not really important. They say such struggles have the danger of misleading workers away from the “real” struggle, the “pure” class struggle in the factory. Insofar as these more political struggles are taken up, they are useful only if they uncover to the workers the truth about capitalist exploitation. It is in production, they say, that the real power is located. If workers can change the system of production, if they can take over the factories and get rid of the bosses, then the apartheid government will crumble.

This economic workerism is not all wrong. It is true that the power of the ruling class, of the bosses, rests very much on the exploitation of the workers at the point of production, in the factories. It is also true that meaningful change in our country will not come simply by removing apartheid. Full democracy for South Africa depends importantly on removing exploitation from our economy.

(This, incidentally, is why the UDF has committed itself to fighting all forms of oppression and exploitation).

But economism takes these truths and turns them into the whole truth. In this way, it tends to ignore the great importance of political questions. The factory is not the only place where the ruling class has power. Without an oppressive political machinery (police, army, courts, jails, administration) the bosses would not be able to continue for one single day their exploitation of the workers in the factory. In our country apartheid oppression (things like gutter education, pass laws, job reservations, the Bantustans) deepen the capitalist exploitation and control over workers, and also over all the oppressed.

While factory based struggles are of great importance, a complete strategy for change cannot simply rest at this level. What does it help a worker to win wage increases, if these are wiped out by more sales tax and higher rents introduced by the white minority regime?

Even from a “pure” working class and economic position, it is completely wrong to limit workers to factory based issues. The questions of politics, of who hold state power, of who makes the laws, of who controls the police, the courts, the army, prisons and administration

cannot be ignored. Without addressing these questions the factory-based gains made by the workers will always be in danger of being wiped out.

With the upsurge of massive political struggles in South Africa over the last two years, the weaknesses of economism have been widely understood by workers, and most other progressives.

While economism still lingers on in some places, it has generally been abandoned, or adapted and reformed. One reformed brand of economism can be called syndicalism.

2. WORKERISM AS SYNDICALISM

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

There are some reformist as well as more militant versions of this syndicalism. The reformist version hopes for some movement or party modeled on the British Labour Party to emerge. The trade union movement would be the main participant in such a labour movement. For the reformists, struggle is limited to the struggle to improve conditions, without ending our enslavement. More militant versions of this syndicalism see the trade unions as the spearhead of attack on the apartheid government and bourgeois rule. In this case the chosen strategy is the general strike. In fact, the general strike tends to be stressed by these militant syndicalists to the exclusion of all other strategies and tactics.

Both the reformist and militant versions of syndicalism have one thing in common. They both think that the leading role of the working class means the leading role of the progressive trade unions.

But the leading role of the working class in our struggle is not the same thing as the leading role of the progressive trade unions. To understand why we say this, and to understand more clearly the errors of syndicalism, we need to look at the strengths and weaknesses of trade unions.

THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF TRADE UNIONS

Trade unions have made, and they will continue to make, a great contribution to the whole liberation movement. It is often within trade unions that workers begin to learn of their collective strength as a class. The trade union struggles enable workers to understand more clearly that their interests and those of the bosses are fundamentally opposed. In democratic trade unions, hundreds of thousands of South African workers get organizational training. They take part in discussions, elections, mandating and representing. The trade unions are a great school of struggle for workers. It is in the interest of the UDF and whole national democratic struggle in South Africa that the maximum number of workers is organized into democratic, national, industrial trade unions.

The trade unions are also more than just a school of struggle. They are in their own right, powerful weapons, enabling workers to strike heavy blows against the bosses and against the whole apartheid system.

But trade unions have limitations. The first aim of a trade union is to organize the maximum number of workers in a factory, and eventually within an industry.

Its major means of mobilization and organization is around the immediate factory floor issues — like wages and working conditions. If this is the first aim of a progressive trade union, then it would be incorrect to exclude workers who say they are “not interested in politics,” or who have many different, even confused political views.

In South Africa, the progressive trade unions often include many ordinary workers who are not political, or who are, for instance, Inkatha members. Many of these workers are, nevertheless, loyal union members.

It is completely correct that the progressive trade unions should throw their net wide. They would be failing in their task if they excluded an ordinary worker because he or she has confused political views. This is not to say that trade unions should make no effort to educate their members politically. But this is a process, something that can take time. By throwing their net wide, and by exposing thousands of workers to democratic organization and collective, militant struggle, the trade unions can act as a major link between the working class and political organizations and struggle.

What we have just said about trade unions shows why unions have political limitations. This is not the fault of trade unions. They would, in fact, be failing in their political tasks if they tried to become political parties open only to the most politically advanced workers with the same programme and outlook.

Because they recruit widely, trade unions are often not able to move quickly and effectively in day to day political struggles. The political mandates of officials are often more limited than those of political organizations, where the voluntary members have already agreed to a political programme.

But we must not take this argument too far!

Over the years, the progressive trade unions in South Africa have played an important political role. Unfortunately the political contribution of trade unions in the last period could sometimes have been much greater. The reasons for this have not always been the fundamental limitations of trade unions themselves. Often workerism has held back the fullest participation of the organized workers in our struggles. However, since the launch of COSATU at the end of last year, we have seen a bolder political approach. This represents a very big gain for the whole struggle.

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 outlook has been a trade union movement emerging in the absence of a large, open political organization. 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 we need finally to consider.

3. WORKERISM IN NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CLOTHING

This brand of watered down workerism is found within our own UDF ranks, and elsewhere. This brand of workerism shares many of the errors of the other brands of workerism, but in a watered down, not so strong form.

We are thinking here of those who pay lip service to our broad strategy of national democratic struggle. That is, those who say: "Yes, the popular struggle, NDS is important. But they do not really believe these words in their hearts. 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. Our talk about national democratic struggle is "merely a concession to the traditions and culture of the masses in South Africa." These workerists in NDS clothing 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.

Those who still argue in this way have learnt very little from the experience of the past two years. In the short space of its existence, the UDF has paved the way for countrywide mass mobilization, and organization. These lessons have confirmed once more, in the hard school of struggle, the correctness of our broad strategy of national democratic struggle. The UDF sees as its main task the mobilization and organization of all South Africans committed to non-racial, majority rule in an undivided South Africa. On the basis of this fundamental goal we have achieved major victories.

For those within our ranks who are committed to socialism, these victories have created the space and possibilities of raising the question of socialism not within the confines of a narrow, small sect, but at a mass level. But there are also other patriotic democrats, who are not necessarily socialist, who are making a large contribution to the struggle. While encouraging debate and discussion about the nature of change in a future South Africa, we must also safeguard and deepen our unity.

The golden rule in a political struggle is always to isolate the most dangerous enemy, while at the same time strengthening to the maximum the progressive camp. In South African conditions, the broad strategy of national democratic struggle is the route to the most far-reaching and rapid changes in our country. It is not an unfortunate or delaying tactic, it is a broad strategy that we consider with the utmost seriousness.

There are many practical ways in which we can illustrate the strategic weakness of the watered down version of workerism. Let us take just one example. The watered down workerist have a very defeatist, passive attitude towards the oppressed, black petty bourgeoisie, and middle strata in our country. In the last few years these workerists have argued that the government's tricameral parliament and its Black Local Authorities system is designed to create a large collaborating "black middle class." This is true. But from this correct understanding, these workerists have concluded that we must concentrate all our efforts on black workers.

In other words, because it is the government and bosses' intention to create a large, collaborating "black middle class," we are asked to believe that such a group must already exist. These workerists want to hand this victory over to the government and bosses without a fight!

Fortunately, the majority view within the UDF has not been swayed by this view. Guided by the broad strategy of national democratic struggle — in our million signature campaign, in our anti-election struggle, for instance — we have mobilized, informed and organized all classes and groups among the oppressed. We have to refuse to confine ourselves to factories and working class areas in the townships. Because of this, the government failed miserably in its attempts to gain significant support for its reforms among the black middle strata. It is true that there are some sell-outs and collaborators, but they are a small minority, and they are generally very isolated within our communities. We can say, confidently, that on this front, the government and bosses are further away from realizing their dreams of a large collaborating group than they were in 1983.

THE LEADING ROLE OF THE WORKING CLASS

We have looked at three brands of workerism that have developed over the last 15 years. We have also looked at some of the errors and weaknesses within these three brands of workerism. In conclusion we need to consider the question of leading role of the working class. This is a point that all workerists stress a great deal. It is also on this point that they are most confused.

The workerists are not alone in calling for the leading role of the working class in our struggle. The entire UDF (in its national resolutions), COSATU, the ANC and many other organizations have recognized the need for working class leadership. For the UDF the problem with the workerists is not their correct call for worker leadership, but rather what they understand by this.

The economistic brand of workerism fails to realize that working class leadership must be exerted in all fields of struggle. The position, outlook and discipline of the workers must provide direction not just within the confines of the factory — but also in the political struggle, in struggles against gutter education, and community oppression.

Likewise, the syndicalist brand of workerism tends to hold back workers from the fullest involvement in popular organizations and alliances. It is strange that the same workerist intellectuals who, in theory, praise the automatic wisdom of the working class, often have a very patronizing view of workers in practice. In practice, these workerists think of the working class as weak and ignorant, constantly threatened by “populism” and petty bourgeois nationalism.” This is often the underlying reason for their syndicalism. They want to lock workers safely up within “pure working class” trade unions, holding them in quarantine until they are “sufficiently educated” to be able to stand up to the threats of “populism.”

Insofar as workerists have succeeded in this aim of isolating workers within trade unions, they have achieved two negative results.

- they have deprived workers of political experience, of the chance to learn in and through political practice. It is not in standing off in isolation that workers will learn the strengths and weaknesses, the possibilities and limitations of other potential allies;
- they have deprived the national democratic struggle of strong worker leadership. Fortunately, the attempt to fence organized workers inside a syndicalist compound has generally not succeeded. The two negative results have not been as far reaching as they might have been.

Finally, the most fundamental error of workerism in all three of its varieties, is its failure to understand that in South African conditions the working class can, and needs to exert its leadership over the broadest popular unity. Nowhere in the capitalist world, in a country with so many features of advanced capitalism, are the medium term prospects of the working class so good. In South Africa, the ruling bloc is able to secure support only from a small minority of our people. The special combination of racial oppression and capitalist exploitation has created a vast people's camp struggling to remove all forms of oppression and exploitation from our land.

To ensure that our struggle is advanced to the maximum, the working class needs increasingly to provide leadership not just to its own members -but to all democratic and oppressed South Africans to the black middle strata, to the rural masses, to the unemployed, and to the youth.

The errors of workerism (whether it is economism or syndicalism, or a watered down lip service to the national democratic struggle) holds us all back. But above all, it holds back the working class itself, from the fullest realization of its important tasks.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/sacp/1986/workerism.htm>