



# the errors of populism

The UDF has achieved massive mobilisation all over South Africa in the short space of 2½ years. This confirms, once more, in the hard school of struggle, the correctness of our broad strategy. In South Africa, the struggle to end all forms of oppression and exploitation is most effective and most speedily advanced by the broadest popular alliance. We call this a strategy of national democratic struggle.

This broad strategy is, however, sometimes labelled 'populist' by certain people. We are told that our use of the term 'the people' in our slogans (Forward to People's Power! The People Shall Govern!) proves that we are populist. These accusations are in fact false. Let us understand this issue more clearly.

## popular but not populist

First, it is important to understand how WE use the term 'the people'. We use this term to distinguish

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between the two major camps in our society - the enemy camp and the people's camp. The people's camp is made up of the overwhelming majority of South Africans - the black working class, the rural masses, the black petty bourgeoisie (traders), and black middle strata (clerks, teachers, nurses, intellectuals). The people's camp also includes several thousand whites who stand shoulder to shoulder in struggle with the majority.

The main common goals that unite the people's camp are:

- \* the struggle to remove all racial oppression;
- \* the struggle to remove the grip of the monopoly companies over our country;
- \* and the struggle to build democratic majority rule in a unified South Africa.

In this popular struggle, the UDF has identified the working class as the leading class. The capitalist system itself has brought workers together into a single collective force. It is this capitalist system that has removed them from the countryside and left left them with nothing to lose - no land, no private wealth, no individual professional skills.

The capitalist system has put the workers, millions strong, into the power-house of our country. It is there together, down the mines, on the large white farms, in the factories and big shops, that the workers make most of the wealth of our country. And all the time, this great productive army, the working class, is being exploited by the bosses.

You have only to list these things to see why we say that the workers must play the leading role in

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the national democratic struggle. The workers are the key to victory for the whole people's camp. Everyday of their lives, workers learn the great lesson of democratic struggle - that as individuals they are weak, but collectively they are strong.

Only this class, because of its numbers, discipline and its major role within production, can guarantee the fullest development of democracy in our country.

## national democratic struggle and ultra left

But if the UDF sees the working class as so important, why bother with a broad popular alliance based on the strategy of a national democratic struggle? That is precisely the question asked by some ultra-leftists who label us as 'populist'. We will deal with the ultra-left position in other issues of Isizwe. But in order to understand the question of populism more accurately, let us at least sketch out the main grounds of our reply to the ultra-left.

As we began by saying, the last 2½ years have confirmed, in the hard school of struggle, the correctness of our broad strategy. Nowhere else in the world will you find an advanced capitalist country that is so unstable as South Africa. Nowhere else will you find a developed industrial country in which the exploiting class is so under threat in the medium term, in which it has failed to win over to its side such a broad majority of people. In fact at present, South Africa is a weak link in the imperialist chain. Of course, there are countries like El Salvador and the Philippines that are much

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weaker in the world imperialist system. But these are poor, underdeveloped countries. So why does an advanced country like South Africa present such a special case?

## a special combination

It has to do with the special combination of problems in South Africa. South Africa is a capitalist country, where the economy is based on private profits for the bosses, and not on the needs of the majority. Like any capitalist country, South Africa suffers from low wages, unemployment and high prices.

But on top of these sufferings, the bosses in South Africa have also made use of other special means of control. Besides the usual capitalist exploitation, we also find national (or racial) oppression. In the past this combination of exploitation and oppression has made the ruling group in South Africa very strong. But now things are beginning to change.

The mass struggles against low wages, high prices and unemployment are linking up with mass resistance to a whole range of national oppressions - gutter education, forced removals, pass laws, puppet administrations, police and army terror. This combination of mass struggles is a great threat to the enemy camp. The enemy camp is more isolated from the broad majority, and more and more an international embarrassment for its foreign backers.

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## the popular struggle - threat to capitalism

This is why South Africa is beginning to be such a weak link in the imperialist chain. The combination of mass struggles against exploitation and national oppression threatens the long term survival of capitalism itself. No wonder the international imperialists and our own local big capitalists are so anxious to 'de-racialise' South Africa. They are suddenly complaining that 'capitalism' is getting a bad name in South Africa, because the majority of South Africa's blacks associate it with apartheid'.

In the past, the bosses were happy to profit from apartheid. Now they say they would love to reform South Africa into a normal capitalist country. If only they could do it without risking their position of control in South Africa and in the whole of Southern Africa! This is their big problem. If they reform too much they risk losing control of the situation to the national liberation movement. If they don't reform, they also lose in the longer term. They are desperate to separate 'race' issues from 'class' issues. But they cannot succeed at present with this manoeuvre.

Isn't it strange then that the ultra-left should come with a similar tune? The ultra-left dismisses, or at best plays down, the question of national oppression. The ultra-left like the imperialists and big capitalists, insist that South Africa is basically a 'normal capitalist' country. In this way, they throw away our key card! In fact, when ultra-leftists say South Africa is just a normal capitalist country, they achieve in 'theory' what the bosses are so anxious, and yet so unable, to achieve in practice!

So, in the concrete conditions of South Africa, the

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leading role of the working class is not to isolate itself in 'pure working class issues'. It is the task of this class to lead the struggle against the enemy on all fronts. This task includes leading the widest popular alliance of all oppressed and ex-democratic South Africans - the rural masses, the black petty bourgeoisie and middle strata, and all other genuine democrats.

This is the people's camp. This is our great collective strength. When we advance the slogan Forward to People's Power! It is this broad alliance under the leadership of the black working class that we have in mind. Let us now return to the main purpose of this article. How does what we have said differ from populism? Why is our strategy of a broad popular alliance not populist?

## populism hides differences

In the first place, populism is an ideology that fails to understand (it often deliberately hides) the class and other differences within the broad ranks of the people. In the people's camp in South Africa there are common unifying interests, for instance, the common opposition to apartheid. But within this unity there are differences. A black shopkeeper may oppose apartheid mainly because of Group Areas and racist trading restrictions. A migrant worker may oppose apartheid mainly because of the pass laws and low wages. A black teacher may oppose it mainly because of gutter education. A white democrat may oppose apartheid for moral, ideological reasons.

These are just examples, things are not quite so simple in reality, of course. But these examples give us some

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idea of the need to understand the differences within the unity of the people's camp.

In fact, in order to develop this unity we must have a clear, scientific understanding of these differences. This is what we mean when we speak of the need to understand the differences in our unity, and the unity in our differences. We must not expect to mobilise and organise all sectors of the people for exactly the same reasons. A black trader and a black worker may have different reasons for joining the same broad ranks of popular struggle.

This is the first major difference between our line and the line of populism. Populism speaks of the people as if the unity within the people's camp was based on completely the same interests.

Let us give an example. In South Africa, Africanist and Black Consciousness ideologists have often had strong populist tendencies. The claim that 'all Africans are socialists' or talk of a single 'African personality' or a single 'black consciousness' or 'black soul', are all varieties of populism.

These examples of populism all show an unscientific grasp of reality. While they correctly understand the need for a maximum unity in the people's camp, they have a vague understanding of the basis of that unity.

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## progressive and reactionary populism

Despite its populist weaknesses, it is important to note that an ideology like BC has played a broadly progressive role in South Africa. In particular in the 1970s, BC played a big role in mobilising tens of thousands of our youths. The majority of these youths have since gone beyond the limitations of BC.

But not all populism is broadly progressive. The case of Afrikaner Nationalism can be mentioned. This ideology also has a strong populist character. It speaks of a single 'people' (die volk), with its own 'special soul' and historical calling 'roeping'. In speaking of the volk, Afrikaner Nationalism hides the class differences between Afrikaans bosses, the petty bourgeoisie and workers. This brand of populism tends to be based on a very reactionary, racist idea of the superiority of the volk.

The fact that populism can be broadly progressive, or extremely reactionary is important to remember. Not all forms of populism must be handled in the same way. In its most reactionary forms, populism is an enemy ideology, and it must be treated as such. But those who hold a more progressive brand of populism must be educated and developed. Elements of their outlook can be built upon, and their understanding and practice can be made more scientific.

## understanding workers' interests

Populism speaks about the people's camp as if there were no differences within it. But in practice it

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often advances the interest of one group or class within that camp. It pushes these particular interests as if they were equally everyone's interest.

Let us take the example of BC in the 1970s. Using populism, BC ideologists spoke of a single 'Black Soul'. But in fact they concerned themselves mainly with issues of central concern to black intellectuals - culture, consciousness, etc. Their populism, their belief in a single 'black soul', blinded them to differences within the camp of the oppressed. In this way they often failed to address the issues of major concern to black workers, or to the rural masses. When such issues like passes or low wages were raised, they were not given enough importance.

## populism downplays organisation

We have said that populism, even progressive populism, has an unscientific understanding of the unity of the people's camp. It tends to base this unity on 'consciousness' or on 'feelings'. For this reason populism often relies heavily on emotional mobilisation. It often downplays the task of solid organising. For the same reason populism also often relies on charismatic leaders - that is people who can sway the masses with fine speeches, but with very little content. Such 'leaders' often speak without organisational mandate. For them the possession of a black skin, for instance, or some 'special insight' into the 'black soul' is sufficient as a mandate.

While we must not forget the crucial importance of mobilising, and of strong fighting talk, the need for organisation and democratic participation must also not be omitted. If we are blind to the objective

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differences within the people's camp, the task of solid organisation is impossible. Without a clear understanding of these differences we will not be able to organise the different classes and sectors into a united fighting force. We will also not be able to understand what is of major importance, and what is of secondary importance. Not all groups within the people's camp have the same potential.

## conclusion

We have seen that to talk about 'the people' does not mean that one is populist. We are absolutely correct in our broad national democratic movement, to struggle for people's power, and to demand that the people shall govern.

But for this strategy to work we have to ensure that we do not ignore the objective differences within the unity of the broad people's camp. We must avoid both the dangers of ultra-leftism and of populism. Ultra-leftism speaks only of the working class and neglects the task of uniting the broadest popular unity in the national democratic struggle. Populism tends to neglect the crucial leading role of the working class within that popular unity.

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## questions for discussion

1. What do you understand by the idea of unity in difference?
2. Do you agree that the demand 'The People Shall Govern!' is not populist? Could you give this slogan both a populist and a non-populist meaning?

In future issues of ISIZWE we will look at other political concepts that are often used in our struggle. Many of these concepts are used in confusing ways. We plan to look at concepts like WORKERISM, VOLUNTARISM, NATIONALISM, SYNDICALISM, etc.

If there are other concepts you would like discussed, or if you are unclear or unhappy about what we have said so far, write to ISIZWE through your organisation or local UDF office.

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