

Notes on the present situation

(The following are extracts from a discussion paper prepared for the UDF NEC)

INTRODUCTION - THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

Towards the end of 1984 the apartheid regime began to lose the political strategic initiative. In the wake of the massive defeat of its 'reform' initiatives, and the massive mobilisation that occurred around their rejection, a significant qualitative change began to take place in the people's camp. With the collapse of its lower levels in the townships, apartheid rule came increasingly to be challenged by the development of rudimentary organs of people's power within rural and urban townships.

For the ruling bloc, the resulting political crisis placed tremendous strains on its internal unity. In the course of 1985 the ruling bloc showed greater signs of internal division than previously. On the one hand, the ultra-right wing parties

and groupings (Conservative Party, HNP, AWB, etc.) extended their influence and mobilisation considerably within the white working class areas and certain white rural areas. On the other side, more enlightened elements of the big bourgeoisie, the PFP and other groupings became less certain of their middle term future under white minority rule. They began to seek contact with the ANC and with the legal progressive movement.

At the same time, and for the same reasons, the major imperialist powers became increasingly nervous about the medium term prospects for capitalism in South and southern Africa, seeing the continuation of the apartheid regime as a major cause for mass mobilisation, deepening struggle, people's war and wide-spread anti-imperialist sentiment.

In the first few months of 1986 the regime found itself in a no-win situation. It is clear that towards the end of 1985 they had been contemplating the release of cde Nelson Mandela. Their political signals to this effect did not take the national and international pressure off them. In fact, they served to heighten the pressure. The Commonwealth's EPG initiative marked the turning point. Despite early misgivings about the initiative the UDF co-operated with the mission, and this proved to be a correct decision. The major demands of the the EPG echoed most of the immediate demands of the broad democratic movement - in particular, the unbanning of the ANC and the release of all political prisoners.

As a result of these combined pressures, in May 1986 a new tactical shift from the side of the regime became apparent. It realised that, both on the international front and the domestic front, its attempts to buy time for 'reforms' that would keep the basic structures of minority rule were failing. The regime abandoned pretences, and moved more aggressively (raids against the ANC in the frontline states, enactment of the Le Grange Bills in the face of opposition even from their own puppets in the tricameral parliament, and the declaration of the second state of emergency on June 12th).

This marked, of course, merely a tactical shift, a greater level of ruthlessness, within the broader context of continued, uninterrupted fascist terror against the South African majority, representative organisations and the frontline states. In the week preceding June 16th the regime launched a massive campaign of disinformation to whip up fear.

For the regime, the second state of emergency (SOE) is designed to achieve the following results:

- i. Smash the rudimentary organs of people's power - specifically street committees, people's courts, and initiatives around people's education;
- ii. Destabilise mass democratic organisations, specifically the UDF. The regime possibly has the medium term objective of banning the UDF completely;

iii. To obtain more information, through interrogation, on people's power and mass organisations. It is clear that the regime's information is extremely uneven ;

iv. To regroup and re-consolidate the ruling bloc. Specifically, to take back some of the language and symbols of the extreme right wing, and to be seen to be taking a hard line against 'revolutionaries'. In so doing, they hope to reclaim some of the support drifting to the CP/HNP/AWB. On the other hand, through promoting a sense of siege, of total onslaught, they hope to win back some of the more liberal waverers in the professional and big business sectors.

The main cost to the regime for this tactical shift has been on the international front. The shift marked an admission from its side to its imperialist partners that it was unable to meet the minimum demands emanating from these countries.

In terms of the four main aims of the second SOE, it is perhaps too soon to pronounce definitely about how successfully they will be achieved. Generally, the regime has achieved some success in regard to all four, but it has so far failed to recoup to the level of the 1983-4 situation (itself crisis ridden). For a number of objective and subjective reasons (see Isizwe no.3) the regime is highly unlikely to achieve a roll-back of the popular forces in any way resembling that of the first half of the 1960s.

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

The current situation is marked by considerable tactical confusion amongst the major imperialist powers. With some R60 billion in direct imperialist investment in our country, SA is of considerable significance to these powers. Their broad strategy, developed over the last decades, is to arm SA as a mini-imperialist power and regional policeman for the entire sub-continent. It is a similar strategy to that developed for the Shah's Iran, Israel, etc.

The imperialists' main concern at present is the chronic instability, and the medium term viability of the apartheid minority regime. With the heightening of our struggle, the last three years have seen, in particular, a significant defeat for the principal aim of constructive engagement : to stabilise the South African situation, while bypassing the national liberation movement, and in particular its leading organisation, the ANC.

In the last year, as a result, there has been a growing tactical divergence between the main imperialist powers and the apartheid regime. For the imperialists, the main tactical thrust at present is to urge rapid negotiations, to forestall any far-reaching revolutionary change. They have realised that it is impossible to bypass the ANC. Instead they attempt to draw the teeth of the liberation movement, while calling for the unbanning of the ANC and the release of political prisoners. Insofar as they are applying limited sanctions is as a signal to the apartheid regime, tactical pressure to secure the conditions for negotiations.

For the imperialist powers, then, sanctions are not seen as one weapon amongst others, to completely remove the illegal minority regime.

One of the major weaknesses of the imperialist strategy is the significant absence of a viable collaborating group. Gathsa Buthelezi continues to be seen as a component of such a group. However, his local and international prestige is considerably more stained, and his local support base less solid. (Even within the PFP there is a clear recognition that Buthelezi's participation in their failed 1985 National Convention Alliance proposal was a major weakness).

In the light of this weakness (i.e. the absence of a significant neo-colonial collaboration base) we in the mass democratic movement need to be particularly vigilant. The last period has seen a vast increase in the sums of money being pumped into the country, for black education, rural, labour and community projects of all kinds. This funding has the capacity to reach into the soft underbelly of the mass democratic movement. We need, increasingly, and rapidly, to develop a uniform political approach to this funding. In particular, we need to guard against the following :

- i. excessive dependency by progressive organisations on foreign funding
- ii. the undermining of structures through corruption

- iii. the unnecessary disclosure of information about our structures and campaigns to foreign agencies
- iv. the tying up of leadership in endless overseas trips, when the priorities lie in building mass structures inside our country.

We need also to be clear that progressive organisations cannot accept money from sources that are using this as a justification for an anti-sanctions stance.

The situation in the southern African region, has generally deteriorated further in the last period. The destabilisation of the frontline states has unquestionably weakened our own struggle. The increased regional instability is likely to continue. As the apartheid regime faces the prospect of its own demise, so it drags the whole sub-continent into turmoil. The interconnectedness of our own struggle and the tasks of consolidating gains in Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe is more apparent than ever.

In the coming period, the mass democratic movement in SA has a special responsibility in this regard. With the exception of some memorial rallies for Pres. Samora Machel, and some pamphleteering around his untimely death, we have failed in the past period to adequately deepen the spirit of internationalism within the sub-region. The UDF should also take more responsibility for pressuring regimes within the region when they allow South African refugees to be harassed, detained and even handed over to the apartheid regime.

THE ECONOMY

The economic crisis in South Africa is both partly independent and deeply related to the current wave of mass political struggles. SA, like many other relatively advanced but not major capitalist powers, has been severely affected by the prolonged, global capitalist crisis dating back to the early 1970s. In SA's case this crisis has been partially, but only partially, cushioned by its major export, gold.

This crisis in SA has, as elsewhere, taken the form of chronic stagflation - low or zero growth, coupled with fairly significant inflation. Although this is a crisis of South African capitalism, its effects are suffered most acutely by the working masses. Unemployment in our country has assumed enormous proportions - current estimates range between 4 and 6 million. The majority of these unemployed are, in fact, youth who have so often formed the shock troops in the struggles in the last period.

The economic crisis, and especially inflation, has also deeply affected the already desperate plight of the majority. The crisis has also severely limited the regime's ability to buy itself out of its political crisis. Even the limited 'reforms' envisaged on the housing and educational fronts, have been considerably more restricted as a result.

In turn, the political upheavals of the last two years have further deepened the economic crisis of the regime. Returns

on US investment to SA have declined considerably in the last six years as a result of the instability here. This simple fact of lower profitability, coupled of course with sanctions pressure, should be seen as a key motivation for the recent withdrawal of large US companies like GM and IBM. While the immediate economic impact of these withdrawals may not be great (the companies have been taken over by South African shareholders), it has medium term significance. It sets a trend and lowers the attractiveness of investment in SA. Politically, the less committed US companies are to SA, the less the South African ruling bloc can depend on imperialist support. No wonder a recent US State Department briefing document which suggested that SA was rapidly becoming 'just another third world, African economy', provoked considerable hysteria from the side of the Botha regime.

The regime's current, more aggressive tactical shift on the political front has its economic equivalents, and its economic effects. With the advent of the second SOE, and the resulting advance of international sanctions, we are seeing the development of a siege economy within the country. The siege economy is part and parcel of the regime's 'total strategy', which it has held in contingency planning for some years.

In practice, the siege economy will mean the deepening of collusion between state and big capital, and increasing secrecy in regard to economic information. The collusion between state and big capital is particularly

to be noted in :

- i. joint strategising on how to break sanctions ;
- ii. participation of political, defence, police and business personnel on the Joint Management Committees. It is here that detailed, localised strategies are developed in an attempt to break the wave of popular struggle.

Apart from its economic objectives, the siege economy approach thus serves to consolidate one aspect of the fourth objective of the SOE - the closing of ranks between the regime and big capital.

Another important outcome of the siege economy approach will be an increased monopolisation of our economy. Already four companies control 80% of shares quoted on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. This monopolisation will increase, and it will further worsen unemployment.

From this brief economic survey we can conclude that those of our campaigns that are centred around the economic hardships of our people (rents, a living wage, unemployment, transport costs, etc.) will continue to be of central importance in the new year. The need for consolidating our united action with the trade unions, specifically Cosatu, is particularly relevant in this regard. The regime will certainly seek, henceforth, to blame all economic hardships on the sanctions campaign. It will be a major political duty of the mass movement to expose this propaganda, and explain the real reasons

for the economic crisis in our country.

REGIONALISM AND FACTIONALISM

The current period requires even greater efforts than in the past to ensure the unity of the UDF. The UDF has over 700 affiliates, it is a broad alliance that came together around a specific campaign, and the momentum of mobilisation and organisation built up in 1983-4, have kept the Front moving forward. In so doing the UDF has been occupying the terrain of open, mass political struggle, a terrain that had been more or less empty for over twenty years.

In the course of these developments, individuals, and groups from many different political, ideological, class and cultural backgrounds have been drawn together. Within the UDF today you will find activists and supporters whose backgrounds are Black Consciousness, liberal, Charterist, socialist, ultra-left, Christian, Muslim, and many more. We have also had to cope with differences between generations, which have sometimes been exaggerated by the long silence on the mass political front in the previous two decades. Generally, it can be said that the UDF has pulled these differences into a remarkable unity, beneath the broad hegemony of the national liberation front and the strategy of national democratic struggle. However, no-one should be surprised if this diversity also continues to have some negative effects.

REGIONALISM

The very fact of rebuilding nationally on the front of mass struggle has underlined regional diversities. Some of these differences are of a subjective kind, reflecting the particular strengths and weaknesses of UDF leadership and structures in particular areas. But this is not the only, or even the main cause for regional differences. The UDF nationally has had to come to terms with regions that are, objectively, quite different- for instance Border and Eastern Cape on the one hand, and the Western Cape on the other. The former regions have large African populations and strong Charterist traditions. In the Western Cape, the African population is relatively smaller, and the large coloured sector does not have strongly rooted Charterist traditions.

Generally speaking, the UDF has learned to work with these differences, while seeking, at all times, to advance national unity in action and a broad uniformity of approach. In the last period most of the sharpest regional differences at the ideological level have been overcome. Our Second National Working Committee, held last year, and attended by many delegates from all over SA, witnessed a new level of national unity and uniformity of approach.

FACTIONALISM

A more serious problem within a front like ours can be the problem of factions. While genuine political differences do certainly play a role, factionalism is often more related to styles of work, and

competing networks of influence and control of resources, and to certain personalities displaying individualism, ambition and other petty bourgeois tendencies.

There is a natural tendency, however, from within factions to justify their existence on allegedly ideological grounds. They will also attack other factions (real or imagined) on ideological grounds. All of this generally serves to obscure the real root of the problem. These false ideological justifications generally take the form of claiming to represent the 'authentic Movement position' - as opposed to the 'others'. The incorrect, and often highly undisciplined introduction of this particular dimension, merely makes resolution of the problem even more difficult.

In understanding the existence of factions, we need to consider the importation of certain styles of work into the UDF from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Positive work in this earlier period was performed and made possible, arguably at least, by certain styles of work - tight caucusing, advanced groupings working within the broader leadership of organisations, etc.

However, the huge development of mass based democratic organisations, and the overwhelming acceptance of the broad charterist perspective, has made these old styles of work unconstructive. The broad charterist position no longer needs safeguarding from the basis of self-appointed, independent small advance networks that bypass the democratic processes of mass organisations.

The UDF has identified the following basic principles as our chief weapons against factionalism :

- i. the upholding of democratic processes of our affiliates and of the front itself, even under conditions of the emergency. There must be no casual bypassing of these democratic processes - even if they need to be substantially adjusted because of repression. No such bypassing can be justified in the name of the 'authentic Movement line', or whatever. The UDF and its leadership is not an alliance, or conglomeration of factions. This is an important assertion, unfortunately in many quarters within our ranks there is a dangerous assumption that the mass democratic structures are purely formal, and that somehow everyone must also sign up with one or another faction. Against these tendencies we must ensure that our activists learn to act in accordance with the merits of a particular line, democratic-ally determined, rather than on the basis of this or that individual authority or factionalist line.
- ii. a clear understanding of the different levels of discipline. Characteristically, factions operate in a cloudy, intermediate area, without being under the discipline of any real organisation - legal or otherwise. However, underground levels of discipline are sometimes falsely invoked (often publicly) to justify bypassing the discipline of UDF structures. It needs to be understood that no independent group, or individual can designate itself as 'authentic'.

It also needs to be understood that the use of such alleged authority in open public forums is entirely incorrect if not downright suspicious.

- iii. democratisation and answerability of service organisations to elected structures of our mass organisations. These service organisations often command considerable resources, and employ many more activists than our affiliates and central front structures themselves. Such service organisations can disrupt the processes of the front if they make independent interventions, or understand their answerability to mean answerability to merely some elected leaders, of their own choice.
- iv. uniform, national programmes of education and training - particularly designed to underline our unity, and to emphasise that factionalism is currently not fundamentally rooted in ideological differences.
- v. the deepening of constructive criticism and self-criticism within our ranks. UDF and affiliate structures must be able to accommodate ongoing constructive criticism. At the same time, loose talk, gossip and slander cannot be tolerated. Those with criticisms must make them within the democratic structures of the mass movement.

The dangers of factionalism cannot be overstated in a situation in which there is a relatively vigilant enemy, constantly on the look-out for gaps within the people's camp. The UDF and its affiliates need to

act democratically, but also boldly and quickly against individuals guilty of gossiping and involved in faction forming. Too often we have waited inexcusably long, allowing factionalism to deepen and spread.

Finally, it should be stressed that the struggle against factionalism must in no way be equated with the attempt to stifle debate, or disciplined diversity within the framework of the basic ideological and organisational principles of the front.

THE DEBATE ABOUT SOCIALISM

In the last year, there has been a growing mass interest within the UDF and Cosatu ranks, in socialism. There is a great hunger for more information about socialism, and for wider discussion about a possible socialist future in SA. These developments are widespread and national in character. Several commercial surveys, in fact, have shown that a majority of blacks support socialism. (The Financial Mail, for instance, reported a poll that indicates 77% support from urban blacks for socialism.)

The handling of this reality from the side of the UDF leadership has not always been self-assured. It is clear that the UDF is not, and should not be a socialist front. The UDF and the broader liberation front include both socialists and non-socialists. This is not a shortcoming. The last three years of intense struggle have confirmed, once more, in the hard school of practice, the absolute correctness of the broad strategy of national democratic struggle. Any individual who imagines that the NDS strat-

egy is a delaying tactic, or the result of a 'petty bourgeois takeover' of the liberation movement, is lacking in any concrete understanding of the material conditions in SA. (And, it should be said, such an individual is also lacking in any understanding of the real possibilities of transition to socialism in our country.)

On the other hand, a genuine interest in socialism and its propagation is not to be equated with dissidence, workerism, or any other deviation. Where such accusations have been made, where for instance interest among youth in socialism is dampened or suppressed, this merely encourages divisions between generations, and the formation of factions.

More positive, open discussion on the future of our country needs to be encouraged within the ranks of the UDF.

