



BUILD THE FRONT

The recent conference of the UDF National Working Committee, held in conditions of complete secrecy, brought together delegates from all over the country. But it was much more than a defiant act under the nose of the apartheid regime. Amongst other things, it enabled the UDF collectively to take stock of the situation and to note some of the significant shifts and developments in the character of the Front, and the tasks before it.

Many of these shifts and developments have been under way for some time. They are the result, often, of the enormous impact the UDF has made on our country. They also result from the pressures and demands on the ground, in a hundred different townships, in a thousand different battles. But our understanding of these developments has often

lagged behind practice itself. Because of this gap, we sometimes become confused, or fail to respond in the right way in different situations. We allow mechanical, formalistic understandings of the Front's character and tasks to obstruct our work. We behave as if UDF and the united front form of our organisation were not dynamic realities, transforming history and being transformed by it. We get used to one form of working and when this opens up new ways we do not notice. We are not building on our own victories that are changing the situation all the time. This allows us to be satisfied with running on the same old spot, when the political situation demands boldness and imagination. We must always ensure that we are making history, as we are well placed to do, or it will overtake us.

But what are the shifts and developments we have spoken of?

Perhaps the best place to begin, is to look more carefully at the theme we have adopted for the immediate future - DEFEND! CONSOLIDATE! ADVANCE!! This is not a slogan we found by accident, it is not a collection of fine-sounding but empty words. Understood correctly, the words have a profound meaning and a great relevance to our political and organisational tasks. Let us try to understand their meaning more clearly.

But first, a warning: These three watchwords do not belong to three separate time slots. We are NOT saying: first defend, then consolidate, and only afterwards advance. No - these three tasks are inseparably linked and must all be carried out at the same time. In

fact, they can only successfully be carried out if they are acted on simultaneously.

We cannot defend if we do not also consolidate. We cannot consolidate if we do not also advance. We are locked into a fierce political struggle, taking place in the middle of a state of emergency, in which the Front is the first and most immediate target. If we go simply on to the defensive, passively trying to hold what we have built, then we will be defeated. We must constantly advance, develop imaginative programmes of action that keep the enemy stretched nationally and off balance. On the other hand, if we advance militantly, without also carrying out defensive and consolidating tasks, we will become a narrow group of activists - an easy and isolated target for the regime.

All three tasks - Defend, Consolidate, Advance - are closely linked and interdependent. But this does not mean that they are exactly the same. Each involves specific tasks and a particular emphasis.

In what follows we will be looking in particular at the deeper significance of defence and consolidation.

DEFENCE

Defence of our structures, our activists and of our struggle involves many things. It requires many different tactics, there are many different fronts of defence. Defence can range from the most obvious physical defence and protection of township structures and activists against the attacks by vigilante

death squads - to the more technical use of the legal system, flawed as it is, to win some space.

But behind the great variety of defensive tactics there must be an overall, guiding political principle. In other words, defence, whatever form it takes, must always be grounded in a political approach. We have always opposed any attempt to allow defence to become simply mindless militancy without a clear strategy or purpose. Nor must defence rely too much on solving our problems through the courts. Politics must always be in command - militant politics, but politics.

The political key to defence lies in broadening to the maximum the people's camp, while isolating to the maximum the apartheid regime. This must be our political guiding-light when approaching the question of defence. To summarise this point : The attack on a single branch of a UDF affiliate must be felt by all as an attack on the people of South Africa.

A closer look at the apartheid regime's tactics over the last years shows why this approach is so important. Since 1976 we have seen the regime concentrate its forces now on one sector or region, then on another. In recent years we have seen a concentrated attack on the high school students, at other times street committees have been the main targets. At times it is the townships of Port Elizabeth, then Crossroads in Cape Town. More recently COSATU came under concentrated attack. The regime scored some successes, but generally it has failed to stop the onward march of our liberation struggle. It has failed because we have not allowed a

particular sector, or region, or the Front itself, to become isolated.

In the period ahead, the correct political line to guide us in the central task of defence can be summarised in three words : Build the front! But we must understand building the front in a dynamic and multi-dimensional way. It means several things :

1. Building and extending the structures of affiliates, and of UDF itself;
2. Deepening the unity in action between the UDF and its natural allies;
3. Broadening the UDF's political and moral influence over the widest possible range of South Africans.

1. Building the UDF

This speaks for itself. It means that, even in the period of an emergency, we must continue (as we have been able) to:

- a. gain new affiliates;
- b. open up new sectors;
- c. rebuild affiliates and regions that have been weakened.

Some areas where extension of this kind is needed were noted by the National Working Committee conference. They included the rural areas, women, the coloured and Indian townships, the white sector, sport and cultural workers, and the rebuilding of educational and civic structures.

2. Our Natural Allies

Building the Front, as we have already

indicated, must not be just understood as adding new affiliates and regions to the UDF.

Especially in our National United Action Campaign, we have been able to unite with our natural allies - including the National Education Crisis Committee, South African Council of Churches, the South African Catholic Bishop's Conference and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Because of the strategic and leading role of the working class in our struggle, it is our unity with COSATU that is of paramount importance.

Here again, a much more dynamic understanding of this unity must be developed. If we have distinguished between building the UDF as such, and deepening the unity with our natural allies - this distinction must be understood as provisional, fluid, and not rigid and inflexible.

Thus far, the UDF's relationship with COSATU could be described as a close, fighting alliance. At a national level we have engaged in joint consultation. We have been involved in joint campaigns under the framework of the National United Action Campaign. But on the ground, in many centres, developments have gone way beyond this alliance-type relationship. As the UDF's recent Programme of Action notes :

"More and more, the rank and file members of COSATU and the affiliates of the Front have united in action around common issues and ~~campaigns~~ such as rent evictions, living wage, unfair dismissals, detention and the state of emergency. Unity is born of our struggle. Our task now is to consolidate and strengthen

this unity at every level. In particular, we need to work towards a more structured relationship with the trade union movement. The united front needs to be built at a local level. Zonal and area committee structures of the UDF must be transformed into united front structures in which all sectors are represented, especially workers, youth, women, students and civics." (p. 33, Papers from the National Working Committee Conference.)

The programme of action's introduction of the idea of United Front at this level and in this context is a new and highly dynamic approach to our understanding of our mass democratic tasks. In particular, it opens up in concrete conditions the question of the working class playing its proper leading role.

For years intellectuals in our country have been debating the meaning of 'working class leadership'. Now, concretely, this is being realised. But we need political clarity and determination to ensure the most rapid extension of this process that is already underway.

Amongst other things, we need to understand more clearly what we mean by working class leadership. Such leadership does not mean much if it is wholly locked up within the trade unions, although the gains made here are of enormous importance. For the working class to play their full role, their leadership must be fundamentally political leadership. It must be working class leadership of and within the national liberation front. In our concrete situation, and insofar as the legal mass democratic movement is concerned, this can only mean working class leadership of the

UDF itself.

In the past years, we believe that great progress has been made, on the ground, in this respect. From its launch in 1983, UDF's policy and general practice has been the building and consolidation of working class leadership. But it has not always been easy to realise this goal to the maximum. There are several factors behind this difficulty, among them subjective and organisational weaknesses within the UDF. But the most significant factor has been the blocking role played by some elements within the trade union leadership, who held back many organised workers from full political involvement. Militant unity in action on the ground has now generally side-lined these negative factors.

The scene is set, then, for a major leap forward within the UDF. Let us now open the floodgates to the widest worker participation within our structures. Let us pursue with greater energy our goal : every UDF worker a COSATU member, every COSATU member a UDF activist!

The dynamic, active participation, from grassroots level up, of ever increasing numbers of workers in our structures will pose fresh challenges. That is how it must be. We must be prepared for this and work to assist this process.

On the question of localised united front of organisations, one further point should be made. There has sometimes been confusion about the role of the trade union locals. Certain workerists, outside the UDF, have

tried (unsuccessfully) to promote locals as alternative township political structures to those of the UDF. We need not concern ourselves with this tendency in this paper. However, an error in the opposite direction has also been committed sometimes by UDF activists demanding the right to full participation within the local - "in order to bring politics to the workers". Such interventions are incorrect. If youth or others are invited to assist, for instance, with political education within the local that is entirely in order. But it is incorrect to barge in. In any case, apart from general political tasks, the trade union locals have their own specific and important tasks to perform.

Through inter-union contact between shop stewards and other factory based worker-leaders, experiences, tactics, problems on the shop-floor can be shared. In particular, through the forum of the local, strong, worker controlled unions can assist weaker unions. In the UDF we wish to see the trade unions and their structures become even stronger. We must give active support to anything that will assist this process. There are vast numbers of unorganised and disorganised workers. There is a huge amount of shop-floor trade union work to be done. Amongst other things, the recent collapse of TUCSA, has cut adrift large unions from their reformist, bureaucratic umbrella.

We do not say that locals must confine themselves to shop-floor issues alone. Indeed, there are some notable cases where, following repression, it is the locals that took the initiative to rebuild township organisations. The locals have also acted dynamically in

various political campaigns. But, equally, it is incorrect to turn the locals into pure political organs. At the local level, the forums for political co-ordination are the zonal, area and township co-ordinating committees. (We will deal with this issue more below, when we introduce the question of consolidating political centres.)

In concluding this section on our natural allies, a few comments should be made on other important areas. In the first place, it should be noted that the united front unity, on the ground, between UDF affiliates and COSATU, applies equally to NECC structures. Besides these general developments, other significant alliances have been forged over the years with such national formations as the End Conscription Campaign, Black Sash and the South African Council of Sport.

3. Political and Moral Influence

'Building the front' is more than building the UDF itself, and more than working closely, if not merging in some cases, with our natural allies. The UDF must seek to extend its political and moral influence far beyond these limits to include the widest possible range of South Africans. This means developing the capacity to intervene politically on the smallest localised instances of oppression and exploitation, up to the broad national issues. This means being able to link specific issues and struggles to the broader national democratic struggle.

In the first place, this broadening of our influence must be directed to the people's camp - to the ranks of all oppressed South

Africans. We have accomplished a fair amount in terms of influencing a wide range of our people in the four years of our existence. But there are still many gaps we must work to fill.

At the local village and township level, broadening the political and moral influence of the UDF means relating to all sectors, groups, and clubs. The national and international prestige of the UDF creates favourable conditions for this work.

To carry out this task successfully we must ensure that we work much more consistently with groups that are not immediately drawn into our main-line sectors (trade unions, youth, women, civics and students). For example, our relationship with taxi-owners, traders, sports bodies and religious and cultural groups, has often been very unsystematic. We must conduct work on this front in a much more co-ordinated, principled and strategic manner.

To give an example, we tend to approach traders each year early in June. We ask them to observe June 16th and June 26th by closing their businesses. And then we don't speak to them again until just before December 16th! When there is going to be a large political funeral in a distant township, at the last moment, we suddenly ask co-operation from taxi-owners for transport. Our relationship with such groups often becomes more or less opportunistic. We pick them up and forget them when it suits particular and immediate needs.

Of course, we expect co-operation from traders, taxi-owners, etc. Resources are scarce in the townships. It is the patriotic duty, and it

is in the objective interests, of every oppressed South African to ensure that resources are available to strengthen the overall people's struggle. But this co-operation must be deepened into a purposeful, structured, political relationship. In some townships where people's power achieved advanced levels, we have seen such deepened co-operation happening. For instance, in some cases, taxi-owners united into structures under the discipline of the township co-ordinating committee. The taxi-owners have then taken responsibility themselves for drawing up duty rosters for providing transport for political purposes.

Likewise, traders and black business people in some townships have taken the initiative to raise funds from within their ranks, to ensure assistance to UDF affiliates and organs of people's power is provided in a structured and ongoing way.

Of course we do affirm, and we shall continue to affirm the need for working class leadership on all fronts of the struggle. To call for progressive initiative from traders, for instance, is not a call for them to lead our struggle. But nor do we think it healthy if traders, taxi-owners, black business people, sports clubs, etc. are treated in an unstructured, or even opportunistic way. All these groups must be won over politically - otherwise some may even become a recruiting base for the vigilante death squads, or for apartheid's local authority structures.

Each and every hostel, club, organisation and structure in our villages and townships must be identified. Through regular contact,

and through the actual sending of activists to work in them if necessary, we must begin to exert the closest moral and political influence over all ranks of the oppressed.

But broadening our political and moral influence must go beyond the people's camp. We must increase our influence over sectors within the ruling bloc. At the national level, our call before the whites-only election in May was a good example (at least on the propaganda level) of what is meant by seeking to broaden our political and moral influence within the ruling bloc. This call endeavoured to address a wide range of whites - PFP members, Independent new-Nats, professionals, big business, etc. To each we addressed specific demands, calling on these different groupings to take, at least, some positive steps in the correct direction.

But, perhaps even here, we were not comprehensive enough. For instance, during the election campaign, the ultra-right wing parties (the Conservative Party and the HNP) spoke a certain truth, even if it was only 5% of what they had to say. In addressing white worker audiences, ultra-right wing politicians devoted some time to noting the collusion between the Nationalist Party regime and monopoly capital. They raised the whole question of falling living standards, of unemployment, and the inequalities between the taxation of the monopolies compared to the heavy tax burden placed on individuals. All of this was accurate enough. Of course, the ultra-right wing touched on these themes for their own purposes. This accurate 5%, which struck such a sympathetic note with white workers, was mixed in with 95% of rabid

racism of the most disgusting kind.

But we in the UDF failed to address white workers in Afrikaans (the language they mostly speak) around the issues, grudges and grievances that concern them. We failed, therefore to snap the connection between legitimate grievances (to which we alone have the solution) and the ultra-right racism within which the HNP and CP opportunistically embedded these problems.

We are not suggesting this would have been easy or even possible. With limited resources at our command, hard tactical decisions have had to be made about what must take precedence in our work. At least, we hope the example of the Afrikaans-speaking white workers illustrates the main point we are making here. When we say that broadening the front means, also, extending to the maximum the sphere of our political and moral influence, we must be prepared to think very broadly, very imaginatively.

By its very nature, this (the very widest) level of broadening the front will produce uneven results. Many of the sectors to be addressed within the ruling bloc may well join us on one specific issue, and betray us on the next. Such 'allies' are much less trustworthy than those we have enumerated as our natural allies or as those who have still to be won over more thoroughly from within the people's camp. But this does not mean that work on this, the broadest front, is pointless. Our duty is always to isolate to the maximum the main enemy. We must deprive the enemy of every support base, and of every potential ally. To the extent that we render

some of the regime's natural allies wavering and untrustworthy for it, that in itself is a gain for our national liberation struggle.

It should be stressed that our intervention on this broader front must always be principled and guided by clear political considerations which are understood by the masses. Short-term gains at this level must not be made at the price of confusion and division within the UDF itself, and between the UDF and its natural allies. These latter levels must always enjoy our priority attention. Having said this, we must also be prepared to provide political leadership to the masses, to our natural allies and within the Front itself. We cannot, as we sometimes do, invoke the "unpreparedness of the masses" to excuse our own unwillingness to adopt what is a correct line of action.

So far we have considered the many dimensioned character of one major task - the task of DEFENDING our structures, our organisation and our struggle. We have said that the essence of defence is political. The political guideline to this task can be summed up in the words : BUILD THE FRONT ! We must remember two things -

1. From what we have already said it should be clear that building the front is not just defensive, it is also a major form of advance.
2. All of this broadening work is possible only if at the same time we address the second major task - CONSOLIDATION.

CONSOLIDATION

The biggest truck needs an engine to propel it. While building and broadening the front, we cannot neglect the task of consolidating the organisational machinery of the UDF and of the broad national democratic movement. This involves several related tasks :

1. In the first place, we need to build the UDF and affiliate structures that are able to weather the onslaught of the regime's emergency, the death squads, etc. This means deepening our vigilance, discipline and daring. Throughout the country this process is underway. We must consolidate it.

We have mastered many of the techniques of secret, underground work. Under the nose of the enemy we have managed to successfully launch national structures (SAYCO, UDF Women's Congress) and we have held a secret National Working Committee Conference. Many local UDF structures are operating successfully in spite of repression.

While developing these skills, we must not confuse our tactical adoption of some underground methods with the strategic underground methods that organisations like the ANC have chosen. For UDF, tactical use is made of some underground methods in order to continue open, mass level work. The tactical use of these methods does not mean abandoning our legality, or our struggle to preserve it. It is necessary to draw this distinction between tactical and strategic underground work because serious political errors are likely to flow from confusing them.

2. A second important aspect to consolidation is one that has already been dealt with, at length, in the pages of ISIZWE. This is the task of deepening the ideological and organisational unity within the UDF. Amongst other things, this involves a steadfast battle to overcome factionalism, regionalism and individualism. Sound organisational democracy and much more dynamic political education and training are the keys to this battle. We have made fair progress on this front in the past two years. The recent NWC provided a very good indication of this fact. As the introduction to the papers from the NWC Conference puts it :

"The conference represented the depth of leadership in our movement as the majority of delegates were attending a national conference of the UDF for the first time. It also represented the growing unity and cohesiveness at all levels within the Front - there was a marked absence of regionalism, factionalism, individualism and position-seeking." (page 2)

The popularisation of the Freedom Charter by the UDF marks a new and significant step on the road to ideological consolidation. With COSATU having adopted the FC this also has important implications for the process of building and providing ideological content to the united front of organisations at the township level.

3. A third aspect of consolidation has been seen in the development of powerful, sector-based national affiliates. In particular, the launch of SAYCO and the

UDF Women's Congress. In the case of SAYCO, the existence of a national youth structure has dynamised local and regional youth structures, giving new life and a new sense of purpose and unity. This national structure has also provided the youth, the most militant of our sectors, with a much stronger, structured presence within the national and regional organs of the UDF. Although organisational developments are less advanced on the women's front, the same benefits can be anticipated. Similar consolidation is now occurring on the civic front.

We have dealt with three aspects of the task of consolidation, but we have yet to deal with what is, probably, the most significant of all.

4. The fourth aspect to consolidation is the development of political centres at every level from the zone, or small township upwards. Such political centres will gravitate around the UDF, but will not necessarily be exclusively UDF. And here we refer back to our earlier discussion on the localised united front of organisations. At the local level, the political centre is the heart and engine of the united front of organisations.

In a sense, this development has already been underway for some time. But it has been happening in an unsystematic, uncoordinated way. It has been happening as a direct result of the needs, pressures and tasks on the ground.

As a result, comrades have sometimes been

unclear, confused, even uneasy about this development. This is all the more reason for understanding more clearly the process and its necessity.

But what do we mean by 'political centres'? By 'political centres' we are referring to organisational collectives that are capable of providing political leadership, that are able to strategise, to lead. Political centres are collectives that do not simply react to one crisis after another. They are able to plan ahead, carrying the struggle to the enemy on the people's terms. For this reason, this aspect of consolidation is centrally linked also to our third watchword - ADVANCE.

The concept of 'political centre' means that all our co-ordinating structures - the zonal, area and township structures, our REC's and the NEC must be more than the simple sum of their parts. A township co-ordinating committee, for instance, must not simply be a bureaucratic recording of mandates from its affiliates. Without for a moment undermining the importance of internal democracy of affiliates, it must be able to adopt a global (an overall) approach to the township, and to reach beyond the township. At one time it will be encouraging the diverse work of different sectors, at another time it will marshall all forces together to strike a single blow against a weak link. At still another time it will be planning ahead, promoting political education through all affiliates, street committees etc, on key issues of the moment.

This is our understanding of the concept of

'political centre'. The political centre is needed at all levels of our struggle. It is the key component to consolidation, and it is equally important for the tasks of defence and advance.

It is true, however, that some comrades are uncertain about the idea of political centres. Their misgiving is based on a concern that the UDF would be changing its character, moving away from being a strict front of affiliates, the sum of its parts.

In one sense, this misgiving is academic. The process to which we are referring has already been underway for some time. This is not because some mastermind in a national structure of the UDF has thought it out. No - the tidal wave of mass struggle over the last few years, partly as a result of the UDF's national impact, has in turn compelled the UDF to change and adapt itself to the changing conditions. This has happened often without any conscious decision.

In particular, that major landmark in our national liberation struggle, the development (more or less spontaneously) from 1985 onwards, of rudimentary structures of people's power, has had profound effects on the nature of the UDF. At the township level, the street, the block and zonal structures cut across the old sectoral lines of our affiliates. A zone delegate on a township co-ordinating structure is a political delegate with responsibility to the zone. That responsibility is global-political, and not specific to a particular sector, be it youth, civic, labour, women or student.

But to acknowledge that our co-ordinating structures have for some years already begun to crystallise into political centres, is not to answer the misgiving. It might be happening, but is it good? Does such a process undermine the front character of the UDF? In the name of consolidation, are we undermining the crucial and related task of broadening the front? Does the development of political centres at every level, from the zone up, mean narrowing the base of the UDF? We believe that the opposite is true. But it does depend on how the task of consolidating political centres is understood and implemented.

The root of certain comrades' misgivings lies in a confusion over the nature and relationship between democracy and leadership. Active, dynamic political leadership should not be opposed to mass democracy. Such leadership relates to, works with, respects, and is finally responsible to the democratic processes of the UDF, its affiliates and to general organs of people's power. But, at the same time, it thinks ahead, it suggests strategic tasks that are more significant or more likely to produce results than others. Active leadership adopts a global, overview approach. It might note, for instance, the under-representation or absence of a key sector (for example, organised workers) within the area committee. It will take responsibility for rectifying this. An active political centre with a strong mass base will also think beyond its immediate area of operation. It takes responsibility, for example, for other weakly organised townships in the vicinity, or for exerting at least some moral and political influence over the

local white community. It might concern itself not just with its township, but also with the nearby industrial zone, or an outlying rural area. A strong political centre dispatches cadres to other areas, it assists with resources and with education and training. Needless to say, it relates to these other areas with the same respect for existing democratic structures and networks, as it does to its own base.

These are just some examples of the way in which leadership exercised through the forum of the political centres rises above the mere bureaucratic assembling of mandates, while not undermining organisational democracy. In fact without such leadership, organisations themselves will wither away.

The consolidation of political centres in the united front and the broadening of the front are not in contradiction with each other. Without the broad front, the political centre has too few links with the masses, its leadership is up in the air. It becomes an easy target for repression. On the other hand, without consolidating strong political leadership centres at every level, the broad front will lose direction, weaken and break up. The political centre and broad front, the tasks of consolidating and of defence, link up and together they enable us to fulfill the third of our watchwords - ADVANCE !

