

OVGWU Proposals for Union Unity

These proposals were sent by the Orange Vaal General Workers Union to the General Workers Union on the 4th March 1983 for distribution to all unions attending the summit on trade union unity in April 1983.

A year and a half has passed since our trade unions first began an organised drive for unity at the Langa summit in Cape Town. Since then, in spite of two further summits, the 'paper' unity that was agreed at Langa has been thrown away by representatives of the trade unions. Today, with another summit approaching and the working class needing unity in action more urgently than ever, our trade unions are dangerously divided from each other. Every conscious worker and every serious trade union leader is concerned about this.

The coming summit is an opportunity for us to put right this wrong. Our proposals will be on the agenda at the summit. We feel they provide a sound basis for building the unity of the trade unions and the working class as a whole.

All who are serious about working class unity are urged to study these proposals to take them up in their organisations and to fight to implement them wherever they are. For finally it is only in the actual struggle to build unity in action that the much hoped for goal of a single united trade union movement will be realised.

Who has been divided — workers or leadership?

Though the Langa summit was for leadership a result of a desire for a common stand in the face of the state's attempts to control the unions (Labour Relations Amendment Bill); for many workers it was a product of the great striving for unity in struggle which had re-emerged with the PE motor strikes in 1979. It was, in a sense, an echo of the cry for unity coming from the rank and file in struggles throughout the country. Its resolutions — particularly the one for Solidarity Action Committees — reflected the mood and search for united action amongst workers in all trade unions.

Unfortunately though, the Langa resolutions were never seriously implemented. And each subsequent summit has only demonstrated this further — as we found more and more about which to disagree, workers in struggle were more and more reaching out to one another for unity and solidarity.

Virtually throughout this period workers showed in action their willingness to unite around the burning issues of the day — low wages and high prices, pensions, victimisations, retrenchments and recognition. The pension strikes, the East Rand strikes, the Wilson Rowntree strike, the

Sundumbili general strike, the Firestone sympathy strike and blacking action are just some of the striking examples of the growing solidarity and united action amongst workers.

While we leaders were deepening the divisions between unions on questions such as registration, industrial councils, non-racialism, the form which trade union unity should take and more concealed political differences, workers were building solidarity in action around the most important day to day issues around their common needs. Everywhere workers took action, workers showed a real basis for unity existed around the issues they were fighting.

But up to now these issues — the issues that workers themselves were already building unity around — haven't even been seriously discussed as a basis for unity by us trade union leaders. Instead we have concentrated on questions which only widened the differences between us to the extent that all agreement broke down completely at the last summit. And through this entire period, we do not remember one single group of workers anywhere in the country taking action around any of the issues leadership was discussing for unity.

Instead of discussing the common needs of workers, the issues which workers themselves were showing they needed to unite around, leadership split itself apart on other questions, questions which were not the burning issues for the working class. This is not to say that these questions are unimportant and that the OVGWU does not have a position on them. We do.

We are against registration, against industrial councils, for non-racialism and for a united mass trade union movement built around the independent needs of workers. But we do not make our position on these questions a pre-condition for unity with other trade unions.

We say: let us look to the problems we have in common; let us look to the issues which workers themselves are taking action on and building solidarity around; let us look to the issues which directly affect and concern all workers — no matter what union they are in or whether they are in a union at all; and let us begin to build the unity of the trade union movement around these common needs of all workers despite the differences we may have on other questions.

The conditions under which the coming summit is to meet are completely different from the situation at Langa a year and a half ago. While the Langa summit reflected the confidence and determination of a growing strike movement, this summit meets under conditions of an ebb in the workers' struggle in the face of the bosses generalised offensive. And the trade union movement is more divided than before against the bosses' more united attack.

If unity was a problem for the trade unions under yesterday's boom

conditions, its absence under today's crisis conditions is fast becoming a life or death question for the labour movement. Every trade union leader has felt the truth of this situation as unions lose more and more members through retrenchments and victimisation and, for those still lucky enough to have a job, wages mean less and less as prices continue to go up.

Now is the time to speak honestly and openly about the common problems and needs that every union and workers everywhere face. Not one single union is free from the offensive and not one single worker is free from the problems. Most, if not all, unions have:

lost hundreds, maybe thousands, of members through retrenchments;

faced bosses who, forced by the crisis, refuse to grant the concessions of yesterday and even try to take yesterday's gains back;

lost membership because of the ebb in the struggle;

faced victimisations that are more difficult to defend against today;

felt the pressure of massive price increases while wages stay low;

felt the impact of the further tightening of influx control and the state's attempts to deepen divisions in the working class through the new constitutional proposals, and

faced growing state repression.

If we say we have democracy in our unions, if we say we have workers control, then any union leader who says that these problems are not their problem is taking a lie into the workers movement. Instead of looking at what divides us, let us look at our common problems and needs. Let us not pretend that these common problems are not our problems. Workers do not need pretence. Workers urgently need trade union unity to build a fighting defence against these problems and for our common needs. The unity of the trade union movement can and must be built by fighting together against the very weapons that the bosses are using against us, around the very issues that workers were uniting around in the great struggles of 1980-82.

Although not always openly said, it is common knowledge that the political divisions amongst our trade union leaders are a crucial factor in the current divisions amongst trade unions. These must not be allowed to obstruct our struggle for trade union unity any further.

By their very nature, trade unions are workers organisations, open to all workers who accept the constitution of the trade unions whatever their political opinions. Trade union constitutions are not political programmes. Every trade union contains workers of differing political opinions. Leadership must stop pretending that its politics are the politics of all

members in the trade union and stop dividing the trade unions because of their personal political opinions.

The workers themselves, in the course of their struggle, will make their own minds up about the way forward for the working class politically. Leadership is there to advise in this process, not to dictate and pretend that the workers must have every option open to them if democracy and workers control are to have any real meaning in the trade union movement.

The option the OVGWU proposes for the trade union movement and workers as a whole is this: the basis for unity of the trade union movement and the working class must be built around the issues that workers themselves have shown are the burning issues right now — the same issues which the bosses are using, with the government, as their main weapons in their attacks on the working class.

These issues are:

1. *WAGES, WITH A GUARANTEED MINIMUM, WHICH BETTERS THE INFLATION RATE*
2. *DEFENCE AGAINST RETRENCHMENTS AND UNEMPLOYMENT*
3. *DEFENCE AGAINST VICTIMISATION AND STATE REPRESSION*
4. *UNITED ACTION AGAINST THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS AND INFLUX CONTROL*

We believe in the OVGWU that these are the issues which are of most concern to workers in all the trade unions and that these are therefore the issues which should form the basis for united trade union discussion and action.

How will trade union unity be built — by workers or by leadership alone?

For some time now there have been discussions, particularly amongst some of the larger union grouping, about a proposed federation of industrial-based unions which, although joined together in united federation, will be relatively autonomous. It must be openly said: this plan, although admirable in its desire for a broader unity, is premature and misconceived.

The task of unifying the trade union movement can never be solved by organisational manoeuvres at leadership level which amount to dividing up the working class between various 'autonomous' unions within a new federation. This is a bureaucratic solution, not a worker-based solution, and bureaucracy is the worst enemy of the independent workers movement.

The way forward for workers themselves to build the basis for a united trade union movement was already pinpointed at the Langa summit when

it was resolved to build Solidarity Action Committees (SAC's) by all the unions in attendance. It is history now that those SAC's which did emerge were complete failures. They have failed because they never were worker-built SAC's. They were, where they even existed in the first place, empty shells; talking shops for leadership with no real consequence for the workers struggle. Ironically, the only occasion where they ever actually attempted to do anything was when brother Neil Aggett was killed. And that was too little, too late.

The way in which to build a solid and lasting united trade union movement is for all unions to jointly commit themselves to building genuine rank-and-file based SAC's in every single locality within every single region where workers are organised throughout the country.

By joining together workers from different trade unions and different industries in the same area to jointly decide on issues and action which meets workers common needs there, the unity of the trade union movement will be built in the strongest possible way — by workers uniting together around the issues of the day, irrespective of what trade union or industry they are in.

Although workers clearly do not need to wait for an initiative from us before building their own SAC's, the coming summit is an opportunity for us to discuss and prepare the basis for SAC's nation-wide.

How will the SAC's be built?

A. In every locality unions should convene, preferably jointly, mass meetings where worker delegates can be elected (for example, one delegate for every fifty workers or for every organised work-place with less than fifty workers) to the local SAC.

B. Retrenched workers should also have their representatives on the local SAC, preferably in an even greater proportion than employed workers given the difficulty delegates will have to report back to other retrenched workers and the critical importance of unemployment for the whole working class.

C. Official leadership should be represented on the SAC's in an advisory capacity only without being allowed to vote on any action or resolution that is decided by the SAC.

D. As in any other genuine democratic organisation, the majority vote among the worker delegates will determine the course of action to be followed jointly by the workers that the SAC represents.

E. These local SAC's, meeting regularly and reporting back constantly to the workers they represent, must exchange minutes, resolutions, report-backs and experiences with one another, and so build up a firm basis for regional and national co-ordination; for building up the unity in action of workers throughout the country.

F. Inevitably, this broader field of united worker action will begin to necessitate broader SAC's, responsible to the local SAC's and their base, to help co-ordinate activity on a regional and national scale.

It is not difficult to imagine what a giant step forward the struggle for genuine trade union unity would take if local SAC's, firmly and democratically rooted in the working class and uniting together workers from all trade unions and workplaces, were to emerge in every single area where workers were already organised. It is the way in which a massive recruitment drive can be launched collectively by all the unions together.

Can any other proposal provide a stronger basis for trade union unity than one which seeks to actively unite all workers together in struggle for their common needs?

Can any other proposal more democratically lay the basis for a united trade union movement than one which demands that workers jointly decide on united action — locally, regionally and nationally?

In certain areas, the embryos of genuine SAC's already exist. The East Rand shop stewards council, for example, and the independant workers committees in the Cape and East London could, if opened up to delegates from all organised workers in those areas in the manner already described, function effectively as genuine worker-based SAC's.

In any event, the emergence and consolidation nation-wide of SAC's as independent fighting organisations of workers from all trade unions and work-places is the soundest possible basis for calling a National Conference of Worker Delegates to determine the form which a single united trade union movement should take. Such a conference of worker delegates would probably only formalise a unity which, through the struggles of the SAC's nation-wide, was already in reality a fact.

Any attempt by leadership to formally unite (sections of) the trade union movement will, as the blatant disregard for joint resolutions passed at previous summits has already demonstrated, be a farce if workers themselves are not already jointly building their unity in action. The first real pressure — whether from the side of the workers or the bosses and the state — will split this united movement apart like the empty shell it will be.

We are still a small union at the moment. More than most unions, the OVGWU knows that if we are to defend ourselves against the bosses current offensive we need the widest possible support and solidarity of the organised labour movement. Our struggle, our needs, are inseparable from the struggle and needs of the working class as a whole. Any initiative which builds the strength of workers in general builds our strength. We need, like all other workers whether organised or unorganised, to unite together with our class brothers and sisters in joint action through the SAC's if we are to provide a genuine workers defence against the bosses

and build a united trade union movement.

We urge all other unions, at a national, regional and local level, to put our proposals — or let us put our proposals — for unity to mass meetings of the organised workers and let the workers themselves, in a spirit of genuine worker democracy and control, decide on our and any other proposals for the way forward for trade union unity.

And let the coming summit be a place where the issues around, and the method with which, we build our united trade union movement be discussed and prepared. Then, through workers action and ongoing discussion and co-ordination, the path can be solidly laid for a united and triumphant trade union movement.

The OVGWU proposes:

Solidarity Action Committees in every locality as the united fighting base of the trade union movement.

United action against high prices and low wages
retrenchments and unemployment
victimisations and state repression
influx control and the new constitutional
proposals

(February 1983)

DEMOCRACY IN TRADE UNION WORK

An internal circular of the Food and Canning and African Food and Canning Workers' Union, early 1983.

A trade union is, by its character and origin, a mass democratic organisation. It is precisely here that the word democracy must fully correspond to the character of the organisation. A trade union would not be able to carry out its tasks successfully if it were not a mass organisation and if this organisation were not democratic.

The trade unions are great schools for the working class. They awaken the class consciousness of the workers, they help them to acquire their first experience of organised struggle, in defence of their interests, and they prepare the leading cadres of the working class. A well-organised mass trade union represents a tremendous force with which employers and capitalist governments must reckon.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the enemies of the working class