

The Question of Unity – A Reply

Alec Erwin's paper, "The Question of Unity in the Struggle" (SALB 11.1, September 1985), raises many important issues that are facing mass based organisations in South Africa. Erwin's attempt to initiate "broad and coherent debate rather than piecemeal organisational sniping" (p51) is very welcome at this time. However, the paper is finally somewhat puzzling. It shifts around uneasily within what Erwin calls a "dilemma". On the one hand, we are told that: "The struggle for liberation from a regime such as that in South Africa requires maximum unity of purpose among the oppressed people." (p69) On the other hand, Erwin argues, the "imperatives imposed" by such popular unity "do not encourage or facilitate political practices that address transformation." (p68) Yet transformation is seen to be critical for the successful resolution of the South African struggle. We are tossed, then, between the need for maximum unity, and the seemingly opposed need to address the crucial question of transformation. "The dilemma is an acute one for working class organisation." (p68)

Without wishing to deny the complexity of the issues, I believe that the dilemma in question is more of Erwin's own making. The root cause of the dilemma is, ironically, a failure on his part to consistently approach matters from a class perspective. Erwin's argument is distorted and finally hijacked by some rather ropey, undialectical categories.

In the first place, there is the central and mechanical distinction that he makes between "liberation politics" and "transformation politics". I shall come to this distinction later. Then, within the category of "liberation politics", Erwin enumerates three possible forms - "national defence", "nation building", and "populism". This is an odd assortment of categories pulled, partly, from academic social "sciences". Erwin then proceeds to deduce certain "imperatives" that mark these different forms of "liberation politics".

"National Defence"

Although it has only indirect bearing on the South African struggle, I would like to begin this critique by considering what Erwin has to say about the first form of "liberation politics", namely.

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"national defence". In so doing I hope to begin to illustrate the mechanical, undialectical character of much of Erwin's argument.

"National defence" is a form of "liberation politics", we are told, in which mobilisation is achieved against an exogenous (ie. foreign) regime occupying an existing nation. This form of liberation politics "has inherent in it elements that are reactionary in that both past and existing class interests are fixed and protected by the symbolism of the nation being defended... National pride and identity is a mobilising force but it also sails very close to the winds of racial stereotype and outright racism...". (p53) In this manner Erwin characterises "national defence"; it is a very one-sided portrayal. He fails to notice that the majority of socialist revolutions have, in fact, involved a strong component of "national defence" - China (the national liberation struggle against Japanese militarist occupation), Vietnam (the struggles against French colonialism, Japanese occupation, US imperialism), the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Japanese occupation, US led invasion), and the post-war socialist revolutions in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe (which all emerged in part, from national resistance struggles against German and Italian occupation).

In other societies where socialist transformation is under way - Cuba, for instance - "national defence" is a significant component in mobilising for ongoing socialist transformation. Among the fundamental organs of mass-based democracy in Cuba are the local, community CDRs (Committees for the Defence of the Revolution). In all of these instances of "national defence", the symbolism of the nation, with its traditions and heritage, tends to be evoked. Such evocations of a significant past are not inherently reactionary, racist or conservative as Erwin suggests. In a situation where, let us say, the feudal land-owning classes, sections of the bourgeoisie, and some of the intelligentsia side with a reactionary, foreign invasion force, it is possible for the proletariat, its vanguard party and its mass based organisations (eg. trade unions) to assume leadership of the struggle for national defence. In this case it is possible to mobilise (in an internationalist, not chauvinist manner) around national pride and identity, and, at the same time, in the course of the struggle, to place social transformation on the agenda.

In any society the past is not the sole property of the ruling classes. The past is not only the past of reaction, of the time-

bound, of oppressive hierarchies, of "great men", chiefs, kings, princes, of courtly traditions and of a refined and mystifying high culture. That is one version, a reactionary version, of the national heritage. But the past is also a past of struggles, of people's heroes, martyrs, of legendary bandits, peasant revolts, carnivals that mock the established order, folklore, work songs, music and dance. In all cases of socialist transformation, whether these have been dominated by "national defence" or not, the working class has been able to appropriate and present its own version of the past. Part of the leading role of the working class consists precisely in this, the ability to project itself as the class force best able to spearhead a broad alliance that safeguards the finest traditions of the nation/people.

Although our struggle has its own special features, there are general lessons to be learnt from the rich experience of international struggles. To understand the objective significance of a struggle for "national defence", or any other for that matter, we need to approach the particular struggle in terms of the concrete class forces involved, their alignment with other classes, their strengths and weaknesses. We cannot deduce in an undialectical and ahistorical manner that "national defence" will, by definition, tend to be reactionary.

This tendency to allow eclectic, sociological categories to displace a class understanding is a feature throughout Erwin's paper. It is, however, with his second and third forms of "liberation politics" ("nation building" and "populism") that we encounter theoretical problems with a more direct bearing upon the South African struggle. According to Erwin, our struggle has been dominated by an "amalgam of populism and nation building" (p60). In particular, it is "populism" that concerns Erwin. Let us look at this matter a little more closely.

"Populism"

In Erwin's view, "populism" occurs in a situation where there is a radically undemocratic, domestic regime, creating "the conditions for an alliance of classes whose economic interests differ but who find common cause against the regime" (p54). The apartheid regime clearly lays the basis for a multi-class, popular alliance opposed to it. But to label such an alliance "populist" is already to load the issue in a misleading and unhelpful manner.

It is analogous to labelling someone who believes in the leading role of the working class a "workerist", or to labelling someone "reformist" who believes that winning reforms (let us say in labour legislation) can clear the space for further advances. Populism, like workerism, and like reformism, is an ideological deviation, based upon a mechanical, one-sided emphasis on one factor in our struggle. Workerism, while correctly calling for the leading role of the working class, fails to see that this leadership must be exercised on all fronts of the struggle, and not just in narrow "pure" working class, shop-floor issues. Likewise populism, while correctly emphasising the need for maximum popular unity against a reactionary regime, mistakes the common factors that unite different classes and strata, for a simple identity of interest. Every front of struggle carries its own inherent ideological dangers. It is the duty of progressives within the trade union movement to broaden, develop and educate the spontaneous workerism, economism and reformism that tend to occur in the trade unions. Similarly, populism tends to emerge more or less spontaneously within the context of popular, national democratic struggles. Trade unions are not per se workerist or reformist, multi-class liberation struggles against undemocratic regimes are not per se populist.

It is true, however, that radical populism has played a large and generally progressive role within our struggle. The working class in South Africa, perhaps no less than other sectors of the oppressed, is heavily imbued with a populist ideology, with strong nationalist, and often also religious overtones. It is the task of all progressives in South Africa to develop and transform, where possible, this populism into a more scientific, class based understanding of our struggle. This development and this transformation are not opposed to the task of cementing popular unity - on the contrary. It is a dangerous, undialectical error to imagine that the cause of unity runs counter to an understanding and articulation of differences within that unity. Nothing threatens unity more than the illusion that the unity is based upon a complete identity of interest. For instance, when, in the name of an undifferentiated "people", students have burnt down the beer halls of migrant workers, the cause of popular unity has not been served. Such unity requires an understanding of both the unifying interests as well as the crucial class and strata differences within the people's camp. (The flip-side of this kind of populism involves a similar failure to distinguish and strategise around class differences within the enemy camp.)

To conclude this brief survey of populism and its relation to popular alliances, it should be noted that, contrary to what Erwin implies (p54), common interests are not all political, and the divergent interests are not all economic in a popular, multi-class alliance. In South Africa, for instance, while oppressed black traders and black workers have common political interests (the removal of group areas, pass laws, etc.), they also have certain common economic interests (the struggle against monopoly domination, for instance).

"Liberation politics" and "transformation politics"

Erwin's tendency to erect mechanical, undialectical oppositions in theory where none need exist in practice, is no-where more apparent than in his distinction between "liberation politics" and "transformation politics". Indeed, it is this distinction which dominates the whole paper. By "liberation politics" he means a form of politics involving wide, cross-class unity and the pursuit of broad international solidarity. He sees this form of politics as being directed essentially at the question of legitimacy. "Liberation politics" seeks to undermine the legitimacy of an unpopular regime, in so doing, we are told, it suppresses class differences within the people's camp, and tends to suppress, therefore, all consideration of transformation.

In dealing with the South African struggle, Erwin correctly queries the validity of the "usual two stage argument" (p68-9). (I am not sure whose "usual" argument it is - are there any claimants for paternity? - but nevermind.) Unfortunately, in place of two stages, Erwin erects a simple two track approach instead. These two separate tracks are, precisely, "liberation politics" and "transformation politics". The only relationship between these two forms of struggle appears to be antagonistic, getting in each other's way. What is bewildering about Erwin's paper is that he hands out bouquets to "liberation politics", while at the same time he portrays it as obstructionist to the "transformation politics" he finally endorses. I have already, at the outset, noted the resulting "dilemma". I would like to deal with this "dilemma" in a little more detail. Let us first consider the international aspect.

The international factor

According to Erwin, "liberation politics", is "crucially shaped by international reactions". (p57) On the international front, as on

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the domestic, it makes good sense to win friends while isolating to the maximum the prevailing regime. The international anti-apartheid struggle has, as Erwin notes, (p60) achieved remarkable results over the last two decades. Support for the South African liberation struggle comes from a diversity of sources - governments, political parties, international bodies, trade union federations, religious and humanitarian groups. The political inclinations of these sources range from communist to liberal and beyond.

Erwin is not wrong to suggest that the pursuit of the widest possible anti-apartheid support might place constraints on the elaboration of the tasks of transformation in certain forums. He is wrong, however, to not see other aspects to this struggle. Above all, he fails to notice the substantial contribution that the anti-apartheid struggle is making, at an ideological level, to question of transformation on a world-scale. The international, anti-apartheid campaign has served to isolate not only our own regime, but also (to some extent at least) the major imperialist regimes. The ruling imperialist groups in the US possess massive political and ideological resources. Their ability to sell the capitalist, "American way of life", while sowing disinformation about the achievements of other social systems, is one of the major ideological blockages to developing a "transformational" outlook on a world-scale. However, their continued support for the apartheid regime and for South African capitalism has dented their prestige, and underlined internationally the anti-democratic, predatory character of imperialism. Our own struggle here in South Africa has, therefore, strengthened, in its own small way, the cause of international transformation. This is a point often made, with great regret, by liberal apologists for capitalism. Within South Africa, continued imperialist support accorded to the apartheid regime, and highlighted by international solidarity, presents possibilities for mass education with strong transformation implications.

Economic development and reform

The unfortunate effects of Erwin's mechanical opposition between "liberation politics" and "transformation politics" in South Africa is also apparent in his consideration of the impact of recent economic development and of the regime's reform initiatives. On page 61 we are told that "Economic growth and political reform are weakening the cement of populism" (ie. of the popular, or national democratic alliance as I would prefer to call it). But on page 66 we are told something a bit different. This self-same economic

growth has, in fact, resulted in a deep-seated structural crisis and massive unemployment and poverty. Not only will the government be unable to buy off significant strata of the industrial and rural proletariat, but: " In fact prospects don't look too good for the petty-bourgeoisie and small-scale capital. This could give new life to populism and if nation-building became an active process then this would reinforce a popular alliance.

This second statement seems to me more accurate, but it is still rather hesitant. We are living in a time of heightened, country-wide popular uprisings, consumer boycotts, stay-at-homes, school boycotts, rent boycotts, very large political funerals with communities symbolically taking control of their townships for the day, and of widespread physical confrontation with the security forces. It seems, then, a little inaccurate to speak so tentatively of the possibility that "new life" might be given to the "weakened cement" of popular alliances. (I am not, incidentally, suggesting that there are not also uneven processes and difficulties within this massive, rolling wave of popular struggle.)

It is true that contradictory economic developments are throwing up new strata within the black communities. These new strata are, in principle, available for possible co-option by the regime's reform initiatives. However, to date, neither these economic developments, nor the regime's political initiatives have scored any substantial victories. Once more, Erwin's tendency to approach issues undialectically reveals itself. In this case, the broad working masses and their allies are treated, it seems to me, as passive objects upon which economic growth, and upon which government political reforms impress themselves. To say that the government's political reforms are weakening the cement of popular alliance is to mistake government (and capitalist) intentions, for actual achievements. The attempted reforms of 1984 created political space that a broad range of working class and popular organisations were able to actively exploit. The level of popular mobilisation, and (to an extent) organisation has risen dramatically in the last 12 months. If anything, the regime's back-firing reforms have strengthened the cement of popular alliance. This is not to say that complacency can now be the order of the day, that the regime might not make gains in the future. Nor (for those who see populism as the biggest headache) should we imagine that some elements and strata currently drawn into popular struggle are entirely reliable, unwavering and unlikely to desert.

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From protest to challenge

It is worthwhile reflecting more on the broad anti-reform campaign of 1984, and its impact on the events of 1985. The anti-reform campaign certainly assumed many of the features that Erwin associates with "liberation politics". It sought to mobilise the maximum unity against the regime. This unity was mobilised locally and internationally. The first goal of the campaign was to deprive (basically through election boycotts) the new tricameral parliament and Black Local Authorities of all legitimacy. The campaign ended, unquestionably, in a resounding victory for all popular forces.

However, the resulting mobilisation and organisation on the one side, and the massive political crisis of the regime on the other, have now opened up into countrywide struggles that go beyond questions of legitimacy and protest to address issues of transformation. Consumer boycotts of white shops, for instance, have led to popular unity between the working masses and black shopkeepers. These boycotts have not necessarily led to a simple, class-blind populism. In many cases black, largely working class, communities organised in civic bodies and consumer action committees have learnt to draw black shopkeepers into the campaign (they stand to gain, of course), while at the same time monitoring, and where necessary pressuring these shopkeepers, to ensure that prices on essential goods are lowered, and that other prices are not speculatively raised. Where it has achieved results, the development of the consumer boycott has required, therefore, a correct understanding of class differences within popular unity. At the same time the question of democratic control and the transformation of social consumption has begun to be addressed.

On the education front in the Western Cape, for instance, the school boycotts, or rather the curriculum boycotts have arisen directly out of the soil of last year's anti-election campaign. In marches on locked schools, and in alternative programmes, parents, teachers and students have gone beyond challenging the state's (and Carter Ebrahim's) legitimacy, to advancing questions of popular (and often, working class) control and transformation of education. Other examples may be cited, the point I wish to underline is that "transformation politics" can, and has emerged from the impetus of "liberation politics". They do not belong to two irreconcilable tracks, forever presenting us with a dilemma. I hope the examples I have used will also serve to show that questions of "transformation" are not just emerging in "the independ-

ent shop-floor based unions" as Erwin seems to imply. (p68)

Unity and transformation

I do not deny that balancing the need for economic (and other) programmes related to transformation with the need to develop wide unity and international solidarity can be complicated tasks. There are different levels of work, there are different styles of work which are appropriate at these different levels. How to ensure the greatest success in one particular field, in a principled way, without undercutting the broader "transformation" struggle, is not always an easy matter. But developing appropriate strategies and tactics is not assisted by erecting a wall between "liberation politics" and "transformation politics".

How do we go forward? Certainly, the question of transformation needs to be looked at much more seriously, it needs to be raised, in and through struggle, within all progressive organisations. This is a collective task.

Certainly, also, a great deal more attention needs to be given to deepening mass-based democracy in all sectors (labour, civic, student, youth, women, sports etc.). This means developing the collective character of decision-making, tightening up on discipline, and on the accountability of leadership. Deepening democracy is, in principle, an important means to ensuring greater working class participation, responsibility and leadership within our struggle.

The task of extending and deepening mass-based democratic organisation is also particularly important at a time when the apartheid regime and international and local capital are manoeuvring frantically to take the steam out of the current wave of popular struggle. On the one hand, leadership of progressive organisations is being decimated through detention, trial and straight assassination. On the other hand, various reformist plans hope to detach and corrupt credible leadership from the mass base, with a view to negotiating, behind closed doors, some arrangement to render South Africa safe for local capitalism and international imperialism.

Although I am convinced that neither repression nor the various reformist confections will succeed in their ultimate dreams, the task of deepening mass-based democracy acquires greater urgency.

(Jeremy Cronin, November 1985)