

# Workerism and the Way Forward – A Rejoinder

the Isizwe Collective

Isizwe welcomes South African Labour Bulletin's re-publication of our article, "Errors of Workerism", and the debate that the two trade unionists take up with this article (SALB, Vol.12 No.3, 1987). We are pleased to note that, whatever their differences with the article in question, the two trade unionists agree with our basic definition of workerism, and with the need to criticise this ideological position. Such criticism is required in the interests, not of minimising, but in fact deepening the leading role of the working class in our struggle for liberation, democracy and an end to exploitation.

Any debate we conduct must be fully aware of its serious responsibilities. Our debates occur in a context in which, in little over a year, in joint national action spearheaded by COSATU and UDF, the working masses of our country have marshalled their forces together in major actions. The most notable have been the massive May 1st and June 16th stayaways of last year, and this year's May 5-6th general political strike. We are also debating questions of strategy and tactics in a period in which, at a mass level, a deeply significant process has been developing. In a variety of ways, through workers' locals, factory occupation, defence committees, neighbourhood care groups, street committees, rural village committees, student SRCs and PTAs, we have seen the development of rudimentary organs of democratic popular power. However uneven they may still be, we have no doubt that, looking back in 20 years time, these grassroots developments in the period since 1985 will be seen to have been turning points in the liberation and transformation of our country.

We are also involved in discussion and debate at a time when, precisely because of the gains referred to above, state repression and acts of rightwing terrorism against progressive organisations are attaining new heights. Again we can only repeat, our debates must be conducted with the fullest sense of responsibility. We trust that all concerned are not trying to score points off each other in a little debating society contest.

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In this, our reply to the two trade unionists, we would like to do two basic things. In the first place, we would like to put the record straight on the main criticisms made against our original article. In general, we feel the criticisms are based on misunderstandings. In the second place, we would like to look closely at their closing section, where the two trade unionists go beyond a critique of our article to consider, as their section subtitle puts it, 'The Way Forward'. In fact, these two basic tasks we are setting ourselves are not unconnected. There are close links between their misunderstandings of our original article and the particular way in which they conceive the way forward.

## A. A rejoinder to criticisms

### 1. Workerism and socialism

The two trade unionists write:

"As we have said the label 'workerism' is used as a smear to discredit many socialists. If the intention of the authors was to attack genuinely workerist tendencies in the liberation struggle then we stand fully behind them. If this is not the case - and the term 'workerism' is being used as a smear - then the result will be to hinder open debate ... etc." (p64-5).

We are pleased to say that, in this case, the two trade unionists will be 'fully behind' us. We are surprised there should be any doubt about this issue. We refer readers to the subsection of our original article titled 'A Warning' (pg 54 in SALB reprint), in which readers are warned against using words like 'populism' and 'workerism' as loose, sectarian slogans. And in the concluding paragraphs of the article we say quite clearly that the major shortcoming of workerism is, ironically, that it obstructs the realisation of working class leadership and the struggle to remove all forms of oppression and exploitation - i.e. (do we need to spell it out?) it obstructs the advance to socialism.

We would also like to refer the two trade unionists, and SALB readers in general, to an article 'Notes on the present situation' in Isizwe Vol.1 No.4, especially the section titled, 'The debate about socialism'. Since the relevant paragraphs express exactly the views of the Isizwe collective on this matter, we would like to quote at some length:

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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 wiser discussion about a possible socialist future in South Africa. These developments are widespread and national in character. (...) 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 short-coming. 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 strategy 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 South Africa. (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 with the ranks of the UDF. (p.18-19)

The two trade unionists may not agree with our line, but at least we hope that their fear that our attack on workerism was an attack on socialism is finally laid to rest.

## 2. History of the re-emergent trade unions

In their appraisal of our treatment of this topic, the two trade unionists have missed the point. In the first place, we were not trying to write a short history of the trade union movement over the last period. But, rather, we isolated the role of a certain group of intellectuals within this movement and tried thereby to trace some of the ideological roots of workerism.

It was also never our contention that academic 'Marxism' gave "rise to mass democratic organisation in the factory floor", as

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the two trade unionists allege (p.66). As we make quite clear, the major participants in the re-emergence of progressive trade unions were: (1) the workers themselves, (2) veteran leaders from the earlier SACTU period, and (3) young intellectuals from the campuses. We also said quite plainly that these intellectuals assisted greatly with advice, research, resources and organisational skills. Of course, it was in using these skills that, in the words of the two trade unionists, in handling the "menial but very important complaints, pay slips, Workmen's Compensation, UIF, etc., that these activists had some influence amongst the workers" (p.65). It was of course, these practical tasks, and not an abstract 'Marxism' that helped lay the basis for the re-emergent progressive trade unions.

However, and this was our argument, when it came to developing broader strategies beyond the crucially important but limited bread and butter issues of trade unionism, when it came to assessing how to relate, for instance, to the major liberation forces in our country, it was then that academic 'Marxism', amongst other things, played its negative role. It imparted an isolationist, workerist tendency in certain quarters within the trade union movement.

The two trade unionists also, very unfairly, criticise us for 'functionalism' in regard to the trade union movement and the defeat of the liaison committee system. Using a very small pair of scissors they cut out these two snippets from our article:

- (i) "the ruling class abandoned the liaison committees and went for a different approach"; and
- (ii) the state "decided to recognise the new trade unions and in this way they hoped to tame them. They hoped that by recognising the trade unions it would keep them from politics."

On the basis of these snippets, cut out from the pages on which they occur in the original article, the two trade unionists then tell us that we are claiming that the trade unions gained recognition thanks to the bosses and government, and not as a result of intense struggle. We invite readers to return to the relevant section in our article, which they will find on p.53-4 of the SALB reprint. Quite clearly the whole point of this section is that the bosses and the apartheid regime were forced to retreat on the trade union front by the 1976-7 uprisings. [For this we drew upon

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Eddie Webster's Cast in a racial mould, Ravan Press, Johannesburg 1985, pl48f] Perhaps the two trade unionists feel that we put too much emphasis on the 1976-7 uprising of students and workers, and too little emphasis on solid factory floor struggles as the cause for gaining trade union recognition. We would partly accept this criticism. But that is quite a different point from admitting functionalism. We hope that readers will agree that nowhere do we suggest that the Wiehahn 'reforms' were made independently of struggle, and were the result of ruling class charity. Nor do we remotely suggest that the 'reforms' functioned for the bosses and the regime as they had intended. In fact, we saluted the trade unions for their ability to exploit the space provided by these 'reforms'. (p.54)

### 3. Democracy

Here we do not want to correct a misreading of our original article, so much as correct a constant distortion of fact. There is a prevailing argument in certain circles, which the two trade unionists repeat. This is the view that in the progressive trade unions democracy is uncomplicatedly "prevalent" (p.72), whereas it can be questioned (p.72) whether such basic democratic practices as mandating, reporting back, and accountability of leadership are even accepted, let alone practised in political organisations.

Frankly, we find this position ill-informed and (we are sorry to use direct words) smug. In the UDF we salute the pioneering work that the progressive trade union movement has carried forward on the shop-floor and within its broader structures. For our part, we in the UDF take the building of militant, mass based democracy with the utmost seriousness. Indeed, we see this as our major task. We have already referred to the historic achievements realised at the mass level in the last two years in the building of rudimentary organs of democratic people's power. In every issue of Isizwe this aspect of our struggle has been reflected and popularised, and at all times undemocratic practices have been criticised.

We do not claim that our democratic processes are perfect. The building of democracy, whether in trade unions or in other mass organisations, is a difficult and ongoing task. Apart from massive destabilisation by the regime and constant vigilante attacks, any organisation confronts dangers of bureaucraticism, selective reporting back, domination by intellectuals and experts, per-

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sonality clashes, factionalism, and so on. Progressive trade unions, like other mass based organisations are not immune to the problems. It is neither accurate, nor helpful to any of to simply present trade unions as five star hotels of democracy, while all other organisations are written off as undemocratic.

There are other inaccuracies and problems that we have with the paper of the two trade unionists. But, in the interests of brevity, we would like now to move directly to the final part of their paper.

### B. The way forward?

We find the final section of their paper, entitled 'the way forward', interesting but confused. It is interesting because it expresses publicly what has been in the air in certain circles in the last period. Because it puts some of these issues down in print, it enables all of us in the broad liberation movement to assess the merits of this position about which we have heard whisperings for some time.

What are our problems with this section? In the first place, the whole concluding section begins by saying:

many activists are debating as to how the workers struggle can advance and consolidate itself so that it is not used by other groups and classes. (our emphasis)  
(p. 74)

It is a great pity that the two trade unionists should see the central issue facing the working class in South Africa in this way. Note that they do not centre the debate about the way forward on: How the workers struggle can advance and consolidate itself so that power can be transferred to an alliance spearheaded by the workers, with a view to the most rapid, uninterrupted socialist transformation of the mode of production. They do not even pose as central the more immediate question of how the workers movement can protect itself against the terrorist attacks of the system. No. Both the long term and immediate struggles against the main class enemy of the workers are backgrounded. Instead, what is highlighted is this rivalry with 'other groups or classes' who might 'use' the workers struggle. Later references to 'petty bourgeois nationalism', and to problems with the 'major dominant political groupings that have a gravitational pull on the mass of

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workers in South Africa' (p.75), make it fairly clear that these 'other groups' are, in fact, the national liberation movement.

Earlier in their reply, the two trade unionists had agreed with Isizwe's criticism of those who see 'the working class as weak and ignorant and constantly threatened by "populism" and "petty bourgeois nationalism"', (p.73). But it is precisely such a defensive attitude which governs their own approach to the 'the way forward'.

Let us proceed with their argument. The two trade unionists tell us there are two suggested approaches for 'safeguarding' the workers' struggle. The first is the 'establishment' of a vanguard workers' party. While obviously not entirely unsympathetic in principle, they suggest three problems with this approach.

(1) They are worried that a vanguard party made up of "advanced elements", and they add, "i.e. intellectuals" - as if workers could not be advanced politically - "would not accommodate the traditions of mass democracy (mandating, report-backs, etc.)" (p.75). We are surprised that the two trade unionists confront this issue so naively, so innocently. It is as if South Africa in the year 1987 were the first place and time that this issue of the relationship of a vanguard party to mass democratic organisations was raised.

This issue goes back, at least, to 1901 and debates within the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP). In this period, Lenin began to argue that a revolutionary vanguard, proletarian party was needed in order to steel and strengthen mass organisations to ensure socialist victory. Lenin's views were supported by the grouping within the RSDLP that became known as the Bolsheviks. It was this group that formed the kernel of a new, communist party. Within the RSDLP, Lenin's arguments were opposed by the grouping that became known as Mensheviks. The Mensheviks argument was, in essence, exactly the same as the two trade unionists' first problem, or at least misgiving, with the vanguard party idea.

Of course, in assessing the value and the possible problems of a vanguard party we do not have to go back in history. Today, in all existing countries of advanced and developing socialism, whether in Europe, Asia, Latin America or Africa, there are vanguard communist parties. These parties while practising their own internal

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democratic centralism (involving, of course, mandating, report backs, electivity and revocability of leadership) interact with mass organisations (trade unions, women, youth, student, peasant, etc.). Does the existence of a vanguard communist party necessarily undermine the mass democracy of trade unions and other mass organisations? This is neither a new question, nor is it an abstract question. There are decades of concrete experience - problems, gains, mistakes, deviations, victories - in socialist countries now involving one third of the world's population.

We do not believe the two trade unionists are completely unaware of these facts. But for the purposes of their article they seem to have forgotten them. Why this forgetting? It seems to us that this forgetting enables the two trade unionists not only to ignore the international workers' movement, but also to ignore something much closer to home. Their whole discussion about the possibility of 'launching' a vanguard, workers' party with a socialist programme, passes over in complete silence the actual existence of such a party (SACP) within South Africa since 1921. But this brings us to the trade unionists second problem with a vanguard party.

(2) We quote:

Secondly, what would the relationship be towards the major dominant political groupings that have a gravitational pull on the mass of workers in South Africa? Is it possible to wish away the popularity and support that these movements enjoy? Can it (the proposed vanguard party) afford to be hostile? (p.75)

Well, there are a number of queries that must be raised here. In the first place, who are these "major dominant political groupings"? The UDF? Perhaps. But certainly the ANC which, as even the US State Department knows, is in a longstanding alliance with a vanguard workers' party, the SACP. Why are the two trade unionists not spelling this out more clearly? The topic of a vanguard party is precisely what is under discussion. Why these vague references to "major dominant political groupings"? Could it be that while relying on the prestige enjoyed by socialism amongst the broad South African working and democratic masses, the authors hope to disguise their own fundamental anti-communism?

Frankly, we find it hard not to arrive at this conclusion.



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This second shortcoming to a proposed new, vanguard party (in fact, it turns out to be more a regret than a shortcoming), is, we are sorry to say, opportunist. It amounts to saying that however good an idea it might be, we would not get away with it - 'It would appear as an alternative' ... to 'the dominant political organisations' ... 'The leadership of the dominant political organisations are quite aware of this' ... (p.75). In other words: It's too late, our move has already been spotted! This is not principled politics, it is invoking the 11th Commandment, "Thou shall not get caught".

There is another worrying aspect to this second "shortcoming". We are referring to the way the two trade unionists refer to the support enjoyed by the ANC-SACP alliance as "a gravitational pull on the mass of workers in South Africa". That is an unfortunate choice of words, suggesting that workers are so many bags of sand dumbly pulled by a gravitational force. We do not think that this choice of words is accidental, but we will come back to this point in a minute.

Let us first consider the third and final shortcoming advanced by the two trade unionists to the projected, 'new', vanguard party.

(3) Is it possible, they wonder, "for one to talk of a pure working class politics that is rid of petty-bourgeois nationalism? Is there something like "pure working class politics"?" (p.75) This puzzlement must be related to an earlier explanation that this proposed vanguard party "will be independent of nationalism".

Now here, and indeed throughout this paper, the two trade unionists consistently equate nationalism with petty-bourgeois nationalism, as if nationalism were the property of, at best, the petty-bourgeoisie. There seems to be no understanding of the possibility, let alone reality, of proletarian nationalism. As one of the founding fathers of scientific socialism observed, the internationalism of the revolutionary working class is not the country-less, free-floating 'man of the world', Swiss Bank cosmopolitanism of imperialism (an ideology to match the transnational flow of its capital). No, working class internationalism is related dialectically to revolutionary, proletarian nationalism. Each working class has its own national tasks. These include the most immediate objectives like the demand for a national, minimum wage, or the struggle to build united, industrial, national unions. The national tasks of the working class extend to the final settling of

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accounts with its own national bourgeoisie, and the development of a new nation, with a socialist economy, requiring patriotic defence against counter-revolution and the plots of imperialism.

In carrying forward its tasks, the proletariat is able to draw upon its own national traditions of struggle and culture, songs, slogans, symbols and heroes. In playing its leading role, the working class is also able to rally allies to its cause, partly through inflecting the national traditions of the broad popular masses with a revolutionary, working class content and direction. In short, it is not the task of the proletariat, or its vanguard party, to be 'independent of nationalism'.

Now the two trade unionists are, in fact not necessarily disagreeing with our point. But they make it sound like a regrettable fact of life, as if it were unfortunately not really possible to rid the working class of nationalism, which is (we are asked to believe) petty-bourgeois by definition. Because they have such a limited, negative understanding of the relationship of the working class and its vanguard party to revolutionary nationalism, it is not surprising that they can only explain the conceded effectiveness of the ANC-SACP alliance, based on a strategy of national democratic struggle, as a blind gravitational pull. The possibility that this strategy might actually answer the most immediate demands of the broad working masses in South Africa, while also laying the basis for the most speedy and effective socialist transformation of our country, is simply not considered.

These, then, are the three problems that the two trade unionists find with the idea of a possible, 'new' vanguard party. We have looked at their counter-motivations because they reveal so much about their own position and assumptions.

The alternative to this 'new' vanguard party that has emerged, the two trade unionists say, within debate (presumably in the same circles).

concerns the general idea of working class leadership. This thinking has it that in each struggle the working class should be pushed forward bit by bit into the forefront enabling it to take up its leadership role.  
(p.75)

In this alternative conception, this process of 'pushing the working class forward' would be aided, we are told, by the development

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of a workers' charter.

We have no problem whatsoever with the idea that the working class must increasingly provide leadership on all fronts of our struggle. However (maybe we are being too sensitive about words), again we cannot help noticing how the working class emerges as so many bags of sand. On the one hand, the workers are (unfortunately) under the 'gravitational pull' of the ANC-SACP, now (as a counter?) they must be 'pushed'. Who does the pushing?

Faced with this last question, the two trade unionists are not unaware of their dilemma. Earlier they criticised the Isizwe article for arguing that trade unions have certain inherent political limitations (p.71-2). In trying to work out how workers will be 'pushed', and a workers' charter advanced, they themselves now bump into these limitations.

It could be argued that the impact of a workers programme would be minimised if its corollary is not there, that is the need for giving form to a political leadership capable of serving as the pivot of this process (p.75).

And so they come back to the very idea they have just dismissed, a vanguard party! Then, realising their confusion, they conclude:

It is only in the heat of struggle that guidelines to these questions will start to emerge. (p.76)

Their argument has got nowhere, they have to toss it all back into the melting pot of the 'struggle'. Well, that might be honest, but it is not helpful. 'No revolutionary can profess to have "the line" on the way forward,' they have told us earlier (p.74). Certainly blind dogmatism is not a helpful revolutionary quality. But not having any line, a programme of action, principles, strategies and tactics, and leaving it all to 'the heat of the struggle' is surely blinder even than any dogmatism.