
BUILDING UNITY IN ACTION - THE WORKERS' SUMMIT

South African labour history is a history of a divided labour movement. This division is not peculiar to South Africa. It is a global position since the outbreak of the First World War.

From that time the working class was divided into two basic camps: namely revolutionary trade unionism, a view that recognised that trade unionism must extend its outlook beyond the factory floor; and reformist trade unionism a view that believed that unionism should confine its activities to the factory floor and not have any contact with political issues outside the factory.

These trends have taken different forms depending on the conditions in individual countries. For instance, in South Africa the problem was compounded by colonialism and racism. This resulted in the South African working class being divided on the basis of colour, with white workers elevated to a labour aristocracy status and as such perceiving their interests as common with those of capital.

This article will therefore conveniently ignore developments in the white working class, but focus only on the black working class. Because of its position in the South African economy and society, it has the will and potential to make a decisive and significant contribution to the liberation struggle. However this potential is weakened by the multiplicity of labour groupings based on disagreement on the following principles:

1. How to organise black workers.
2. Alliance of the working class with other classes.
3. Non-racialism in trade unionism.

RESURGENCE OF BLACK TRADE UNIONISM

The emergence of Black Consciousness and the intensification of struggle in both Mozambique and Angola impacted positively on the South African people.

In 1973 workers went on strike, mainly in Natal, demanding higher wages. These strikes laid the foundation for the second wave of trade unionism, the first wave having been from the 1920's until the early 60's.

From these strikes, progressive intellectuals and white students - from NUSAS in particular - helped establish unions for African with no formal political relationship with apartheid.

The liberation of Angola and Mozambique brought with it rising militancy in the country. This militancy culminated in the 1976 student uprising, with the government brutally suppressing the unrest, a reaction that cost the regime further international isolation.

In its effort to improve its image and to gain acceptability internationally the government appointed two commissions, the Wiehahn and Riekert commissions. The former was to investigate labour laws and the latter influx control laws.

The Wiehahn commission recommended that Africans be allowed to form registered unions, on condition that they would be subject to government control. This condition was initially rejected by all labour groupings: Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), Confederation of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), etc. Later FOSATU and CUSA accepted these conditions but the Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU), SAAWU and Motor and Components Workers Union of South Africa (MACWUSA) held onto their initial position.

THE CONGRESS TRADITION

The fifties were a period of rising militancy amongst democrats and the oppressed majority. The defiance campaign and the formation of the Congress of Democrats (COD) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) culminated in the drawing up and adoption of the Freedom Charter by the ANC, Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress, SACTU and the COD who formed the Congress Alliance, SACTU and ANC being the key components of the alliance.

The events leading towards the drawing up of the charter had laid the basis for non-racial participation in the struggle. Our people from all racial groups united in struggle against apartheid. Their unity in struggle was confirmed by the declaration in the preamble of the Charter: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

The Congress Alliance took forward the tradition of non-racialism based on the Freedom Charter against all odds. At times even against extreme provocation from both the government and the detractors. This tradition was upheld until it was suppressed by the regime in the early 60's.

This period was followed by a political lull and the consequent development of Black Consciousness, a school of political thought that became central to political resistance until mid-1979.

RESURGENCE OF THE CONGRESS TRADITION

The formation of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in 1979 saw, for the first time since the sixties, an organisation coming out openly in support of both the Freedom Charter and the principle of non-racialism. In the same year SAAWU broke away from BAWU and followed on the tradition of SACTU - that of actively encouraging participation in the political struggle by its members.

In addition, a growing number of organisations that were coming out in support of the Charter and non-racialism were a clear indication of the re-emergence of the congress tradition. The Freedom Charter became widely read and very popular.

UNITY TALKS

From the days of the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) in the 1920's through SACTU's days to date, the creation of a single federation in South Africa has always been a priority amongst progressive unionists. This challenge presented itself anew in the post '79 period when trade unionism was legalised for Africans.

In this period there existed basically three trends in the trade union movement who had no formal relationship with apartheid, namely:

1. FOSATU: who represented working class exclusivism and non-racialism.
2. CUSA: who espoused black exclusivism in trade union leadership.
3. SAAWU: who represented the Congress tradition, that is they encouraged participation in political struggles and adopted the Freedom Charter.

Therefore, attempts at unity and our understanding thereof should be informed by the following perspective:

- Unity is a product of struggle
- It is only in the trenches of struggle that the need for unity is realised.
 - That we have to rally around us the broadest section of our people on the basis of common short-term goals.

To us unity with other forces is a short-term objective but within that short-term objective are contained our long-term goal: that of winning all the forces into our camp. It is a challenge to democrats, to broaden our scope of struggle and to extend our correct influence to other forces. And most importantly, we can only achieve this in the practical field of struggle.

It was therefore at the height of activity in 1981 that unity talks were initiated. During the resistance by the people of Ciskei to so-called independence, SAAWU played a key role in this campaign. The consumer boycott of Wilson Rowntree products and the Anti-South African Indian Council (SAIC) campaign made it possible for unions to unite in action.

All these campaigns called on democrats to try and marshal the forces towards one direction. Already in the terrain of struggle the masses had united in action. For instance in 1982 the workers irrespective of affiliation embarked on a 30 minute national strike protesting against the death of Dr Neil Aggett. Also in November 1984 a three day political strike was embarked on in the Transvaal. In this particular strike FOSATU played a key role.

Talks went on for four years of painstaking and, at times, stormy sessions. But ultimately a breakthrough was made and the basis for unity was set. By the time the leadership agreed on unity, the masses on the ground had already established their unity through action.

FORMATION OF COSATU AND AFTER

A new era in the labour history began in December 1985 when the majority of organised labour formed COSATU. Once COSATU was formed, it did not mean 'all systems go' with the federation. There were tensions in bringing together unions with different political traditions. But these tensions could be contained because the various unions had a unifying perspective, namely non-racialism, a single federation and 'One Industry One Union'.

And through unity in action the unifying perspective was consolidated by the adoption of the Freedom Charter by COSATU as a minimum demand of the working class.

With COSATU representing the majority and not all organised labour, the task of rallying the broadest section of our people remained. And as such we were still expected to live up to the challenge.

CUSA and the Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (AZACTU) and other independent unions had remained outside COSATU, for various reasons, but mainly ideological. CUSA and AZACTU later merged to form the National Confederation of Trade Unions (NACTU).

THE PROCESS LEADING TO THE WORKERS' SUMMIT

The regime was faced with a revolutionary situation and at the behest of the "bosses" proposed a bill, the LRAA (Labour Relations Amendment Act).

In proposing this bill the government was aiming at erecting all possible obstacles to working class unity and to unity between the workers and the entire formations of the MDM.

More specifically the government wanted to reinforce the ideological and institutional framework for submissive reformist trade unionism, thereby *sidelining the working class from the mainstream of the struggle against apartheid*.

Informed by the perspective that we have to rally the broadest section of our people around common short-term goals, COSATU identified the LRAA as one such short-term goal. It therefore organised together with UDF a three day stay-away in June 1988 protesting against the LRAA and the State of Emergency.

In this venture the MDM rallied around itself the participation of NACTU and independent unions on the unifying perspective of rejecting the LRAA.

From lessons learnt from the three-day protest, a basis was set for a workers' summit that assembled 700 delegates from different out looks around a single and unifying problem - blocking the LRAA from becoming law.

Despite protests and presentations to the regime, the government proceeded and made it law. This necessitated a second summit that took place in August 1989: to look at ways and means of making the act unworkable and thereby causing it to be ultimately repealed. At the summit several resolutions were adopted. We summarised these:

1. To mount a campaign of peaceful protest against the LRAA;
2. A programme of sustained peaceful action against the LRAA until demands are met.

Participation in such a venture should be seen as part of the MDM's tactical approach to win all forces to our side. The campaign against the LRAA should not be seen as separate from the entire mass struggle for democracy and the creation of a broad coalition against apartheid.

WHAT IS OUR TASK?

Our task as the MDM is to strive towards maximum unity within the working class and unity between the workers and the entire mass democratic movement. We should:

- always strive to identify unifying perspectives for the broadest section of the oppressed majority;
- unite with other forces without submerging our ideology. We should instead strive to lead the coalition towards achieving our interests.

To achieve this we have to be strong - organisationally, politically, and ideologically. The organisations to which we belong have to work closely to ensure that the coalition achieves its purpose. At all times and in all platforms of united action we should strive for a single federation.

QUESTIONS

a. "Unity is a product of struggle."

What does this mean?

Explain how the following events proved the truth of the above statement:

- the unity talks
- the formation of COSATU
- the Workers' Summit

b. "Our task as the MDM is to strive towards maximum unity within the working class"

What does this mean?

Why is this an important task of the MDM?