



---

## LETTERS TO PHAMBILI

---

### THEORY IS A TOOL FOR STRUGGLE

#### Dear Comrade Editors

CONGRATULATIONS on the first issue of *PHAMBILI*! In your editorial you said that no struggle has ever been successful without a clear theory to guide it. I want to second this, and to comment on the letter in *PHAMBILI* written by a comrade on the question of language. I agree with the main point of the letter: that our struggle is mass in character and that this must be reflected in the language we use in our struggle. In short it must be the language of the masses, language that the masses can speak and understand. Unfortunately, in emphasizing his/her point, the comrade gives the impression of being anti- theory, even if this wasn't the intention.

Thus the comrade complains that "we always talk about Marx, Mao, Lenin and all dialectical concepts... We must talk the language they (the masses) understand i.e. not use concepts like capitalist accumulation and so forth." By expressing the point this way, the comrade runs the risk of throwing the valuable baby (theory) out with the dirty bath water (wrong language). This is because the comrade has confused two separate points - the development of scientific theory on the one hand and the correct use of that theory in mass work on the other.. Both of these aspects are vital to our struggle: without a **mass approach** our struggle would be hollow; and without a **scientific theory** our struggle would be directionless. We should not have to choose one or the other. Rather we should **combine** both scientific theory with a mass approach, making sure that we never neglect the one for the other.

## Some problems with theory

There are reasons why comrades sometimes develop a negative attitude towards theory.

(i) Very often comrades don't understand theory. This is sometimes because it is used in a way which makes it difficult to understand- in a highly academic way.

(ii) On the other hand many of our organisations neglect to train our activists to develop theoretically as part of their all-round development.

(iii) Another problem is that we grow up in a society which teaches on the one hand you have great thinkers, and on the other you have people who have the thinking done for them. Our organisations have to struggle to fight these attitudes.

(iv) To make matters worse, theory is often abused. People appear to throw around concepts in a meaningless way. The same concept is often given different meanings, and sometimes one wonders whether a person is latching onto the most impressive-sounding phrase, without them or others really knowing what they are talking about.

All these problems lead to activists **devaluing** theory because:-

(1) we feel unconfident with concepts, and convinced theory is beyond us or - (2) we feel that theory is meaningless, and something which is only designed to make a few people sound important.

Those of us who misuse theory and those of us who consider it unimportant are both making equally serious mistakes which will lead to the same consequences: that is disarming the struggle of one of its most important weapons - revolutionary theory.

## The value of theory

A well-known freedom fighter said that "Theory without practise is sterile. But practise without theory is blind." This sums up the dynamic relationship between theory and practise - the fact that the one only develops its maximum potential when combined with the other.

Theory is so important for the simple reason that if we want to change a situation, we have to understand what is at stake, what are the forces at work, and how we can harness these forces for historical progress. We need a system of concepts which tells us how to *understand, how to analyse the apparently chaotic and random events going on around us.*

If we want to act politically in a situation, we must have a more or less accurate picture of what makes up that situation.

This is not something which we achieve simply through our intuition, no matter how good our intuition may be! Intuitive understanding is not likely to be revolutionary understanding since we are constantly bombarded with ideas and interpretations of our society which ultimately have their origin in ruling class ideas.

We therefore need a progressive system of concepts, or theory, which enables us to understand our society in order to change it. We can only do this adequately if we are constantly feeding back our practical experience in the struggle to develop our theory - to keep it in line with the demands of the struggle.

This system of concepts, or theory, is dynamic and constantly developing. As with all other historical forces, it must grow and develop - or die. Comrades will be disappointed if they expect a "ready-made theory" which like the bible provides a ready made answer to everything.

What theory provides us with is a set of **tools** or **concepts** which we can use to understand our society, its contradictions, and process of development (eg the concept of National Democratic Struggle). We constantly develop and sharpen these tools in a process of **analysis** (eg analysing the state of our struggle in 1988). Our theoretical tools produce analysis by working on the material around us that is called **social reality** (or the material conditions that exist around us). The aim of theory is to develop to such a point that the social reality around us is **captured** in our analysis. At that point our analysis becomes scientific. In the process of struggle, this theoretical development immeasurably increases our power to correctly characterise the situation, identify our tasks and chart the way forward. This is a collective task of the democratic movement as a whole: to constantly build on and elaborate the rich treasure house of concepts and analysis which our tried and tested organisations have developed.

Our theory of the National Democratic Struggle is part of an all-round theory which enables us to understand, and act on, our reality. This theoretical approach is the product of decades of struggle, and the application in the South African context of scientific concepts which have developed in struggles throughout the world resulting in the elaboration of new concepts which capture our unique situation. Our task is to harness this theory as a powerful force in our struggle, and to creatively apply it to our constantly changing situation. This

task is the task of the democratic movement as a whole. We must not leave it to one or two "thinkers". Let us encourage our activists to develop these theoretical tools, comrade editors. If we are to take command of the political situation, rather than merely reacting to events, this is an absolute necessity.

**Yours in the struggle**

**Comrade P.**