

TRANSFORMATION OF THE UDF - INTO A NEW BROAD FRONT

Introduction

Since the unbanning of the ANC and other organisations, there have been intense discussions and debates about the relevance of the UDF, its future and invariably the issue of United Front politics. The UDF itself, has held a number of discussions at the local, regional and national levels on this topic.

This paper is informed by these discussions and debates. It is also enriched by the inputs of the UDF National Working Committee (NWC) which was held in September this year. This NWC was attended by all UDF regions (except S.Tvl) the main sectoral formations as well as the ANC NEC members. It is important to emphasise that this is a discussion paper. It is neither a position nor a representative paper. Its main intention, is to further generate discussions, so that when the National General Council of the UDF is held in February 1991, our affiliates, regions and locals would have adequately given attention to this matter.

In our discussions on the future or otherwise of the UDF, we should take into account, amongst others, the aims of and the role the UDF played in the last seven years. We deal with this very briefly.

2. PAST ROLE OF THE UDF

Since its formation, the UDF has played a crucial role in co-ordinating organisations, campaigns and generally galvanising the masses into action against various aspects of apartheid. It also carried the task of setting up new organisations in many parts of the country, and strengthening existing ones.

Before the unbanning of the ANC, conditions in the country had imposed on the UDF, the role of a political centre. However, since February 2nd, the political leadership role has become the responsibility of the ANC.

The UDF's leading role in our struggle over the last seven years was, as would be expected - beset by a number of problems. In the initial years the main challenge of the Front was to build ideological cohesion. In this period the UDF was characterised by the vibrancy, dynamism and full participation of affiliates in the day to day running of the Front.

The UDF began to find political cohesion from late 1986. Its fighting alliance with COSATU gave impetus to a movement forward. Unfortunately, this was the time when the Front was beginning to lose the dynamism of affiliates' participation through general councils, and other forums that made it a unique political entity in the initial years.

A number of factors contributed towards this situation, the main being the harsh repression unleashed by the State against the democratic movement.

70% of the detentions during the S.O.E. were people from the UDF and affiliates. These conditions imposed on the UDF a style of operations similar to that of a tight-knit organisation.

The on-going repression, led to frustrations, apathy and despondency within many UDF affiliates. Even at this moment, most of the UDF affiliates and structures have not as yet recovered from this debilitating effect.

3. CURRENT FACTORS

The political conjuncture and the UDF's position therein is as follows:-

- The ANC is already occupying a political centre in the country.
- While most of the UDF affiliates are still active, they play no role in the policy direction of the Front.
- There are many organisations that share, with the democratic movement, the unifying perspective on the question of apartheid colonialism. Yet these organisations are not part of the UDF.
- We have not as yet reached a stage where we can say the process of political change is irreversible.

Many grassroots and sectoral organisations are outside the ANC and will remain so for a long time to come. The central task facing the liberation movement, is the building of the ANC into a formidable mass formation that continues to inspire, direct and lead our people on the difficult last mile towards freedom. At the same time, it is the responsibility of the liberation movement, led by the ANC, to encourage, nurture and help build mass formations like civics, students, professional and many other structures into independent but patriotic organisations of our people.

The on-going process of building and strengthening these mass grassroots structures, must be informed by the lessons of the past deases on the building of mass organisations. The tactics that have taken our struggle to higher levels, under trying circumstances, should guide our efforts at this critical moment.

For us not to lose sight of the importance of grassroots and sectoral formations in the struggle, their interaction and how their unity in struggle have, and will continue to bring liberation day nearer, we need to remember some few important factors:

1. The need to retained the united Front tactic.
2. The need for a broader Front which will accomodate the many democratic formations outside the UDF.

3. The broad Front should not only co-ordinate and link-up organisations. It should be an active component in the building of organs of people's power. Equally important, it should look seriously into the question of development.

4. THE UNITED FRONT TACTIC

The United Front tactic has played a crucial role in the South African struggle. This tactic has made it possible for local organisations to link up with one another on local issues and give those issues a national character. It has made it possible for our people to confront oppression and exploitation at all levels of our society and in every corner of our country. By interaction, many local, regional and sectoral organisations have developed a unified national perspective on the South African problem.

The United Front tactic has also ingrained, through active struggle, non-racialism on our politics. It has made democracy and accountability the solid foundation rock upon which a new South Africa will be built. Because of its nature, United Front tactic has made mass action a bond through which every patriot make their contribution, however humble, to bring apartheid to an end. There is no doubt that it will be a serious historical crime to even contemplate abandoning this tactic.

The question is: What does this concretely mean to us at this point in time?

Firstly, and as we said, the United Front tactic in the South African situation has been successfully utilised by grassroots and sectoral organisations. Most of these organisation share with the ANC the general perspective of a need for a united, democratic and non-racial South Africa. But these formations will not be absorbed into the ANC. The ANC itself seeks to encourage the continuation and independence of these mass based organisations. The need for these organisations, such as civics, health, students, church, professional etc. to co-ordinate and engage in united action cannot be over emphasised.

Secondly, through United Front tactic and actual mass struggle we have made it possible for organisations that were previously either ambivalent or opposed to our struggle, to move closer to us. These organisations have of course been reluctant to join us, perhaps because of the high profile nature of the UDF and its adoption of the Freedom Charter.

In a nutshell, we are saying that we need to retain the strategy of forming more grassroots organisations, co-ordinate them and engage them in mass actions against apartheid. If we abandon this area other forces, possibly hostile to us, will occupy it. Politics, like nature, does not allow a vacuum.

5. THE NEED FOR A BROADER FRONT

From the above observations, there is no doubt that we need a front, broader than the UDF. This Front must have the widest possible appeal and should include as wide a spectrum of organisations as possible. Its bottom line on confronting all the problems ranged against our people, should be unity in action.

We don't envisage a Front that will end up being a forum of political tendencies. This will stifle the potential growth and will demoralise many people who are eager to make their contributions towards freedom.

It is within this contest that this broad Front should be of like-minded organisations. It should consist of organisations that are prepared to act against apartheid. Last year's defiance campaign is a good guide. From our past experience, we are under no illusion that PAC or AZAPO will be part of this Front - Unless if we want to reduce the Front to a verbose, rhetorical talking shop.

Many organisations that have not been formally in our structures but have worked close with us, should be part of the new Front. Organisations like SABSWA, NAFCCO, INYANDZA, NAMDA, NADEL, Religious, cultural bodies and many others.

We conclude this part by referring to the UDF National Working Committee meeting held in September this year. The following is the consensus reached on the questions of a broader Front:-

1. The tactic of United Front politics is still relevant to the S.African struggle and should not be abandoned.
2. There is a need for a broader Front than the UDF.
3. This broad Front must be dynamic in terms of the affiliates' democratic participation in formulating political direction and day to day activities.
4. This broad Front will consist of like-minded organisations.
5. The Freedom Charter need not be the policy document of the Front.
6. United mass actions should be the driving force of the Front.

6. THE BROAD FRONT AND THE QUESTION OF DEVELOPMENT

The main feature of the UDF in the past has been protest, opposition, challenge, organisation and building the organs of people's power. These characteristics have made our struggle to grow by leaps and bounds.

In the face of the State's onslaught against our communities - the cutting-off of water and electricity, the continual denial of proper health facilities, unemployment, rising cost of living, detentions and many other problems - the need to continue with protest, challenge and building organs of people's power is self-evident.

Concurrently, the need to address questions of national development and reconstruction is accentuated. Development should address the question of producing human resources as well as other socio economic questions such as the provision of education, health, housing and alleviating rural poverty.

This responsibility falls increasingly on the shoulders of the ANC. But the ANC is incapacitated by lack of resources to meet this challenge. This is made worse by the fact that foreign governments have decided not to fund ANC or political parties. Recently the Japanese and Canadians have refused to give funds to the ANC, preferring to channel money to grassroots organisations.

This means that both the ANC and the broad Front have a crucial role to play on the question of development. At the moment, we have many structures and service organisations doing development work. While most of these organisations are close to mass formations, they are not necessarily accountable to them. Our people, through their organisations, must be central to the question of development, without leaving it to experts in service organisations.

Service organisations will have to be part of the broad Front, so as to have the feel of the on-going debates around the needs of the people on the question of development. This means that a forum for service organisations will have to be formed in all the regions in preparation for participation in the Front.

Development and reconstruction will have to be the main essence of the new Front. This is important because we need mass organisations to shape the content and character of development. Civics will actively participate, together with service organisations doing work around housing, town planning and local government, to give direction on questions of non-racial municipality, single tax base, provision of infrastructure and proper housing.

Education bodies will, within the broad Front, lead on issues such as career guidance, extra-tuition, bursaries, and long-term issues such as people's education. The same with health, legal and rural formations.

Each sectoral organisation will participate in its area of development together with service structures doing work in that area. In this way, development is not left only to the skilled but to all the people of this country.

The broad Front will then combine, dynamically, mass action and the building of people's power, with the process of development and reconstruction.

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