

SAYCO DISCUSSION PAPER:

TOWARDS RESTRUCTURING THE UDF:

The building of a formidable foundation for national unity

In order to wage effective struggles, revolutionary movements and organisations always and everywhere seek to maximise the unity and participation of the masses in making their own revolution.

To achieve this objective, not only are organisations formed, but definite and varied marriages are formed between these organisations and those with **some** but not **all**, **similar** and not necessarily the **same** objectives. The strongest of these marriages is the **alliance**. An alliance is formed by organisations which agree on the key questions of the struggle or the stage of that struggle to which they all belong and are relevant. Each one of these organisations entering an alliance has a definite programme independent from those of other participants. But the points of agreement are so strong as to make it an absolute necessity that such a marriage must develop. Whereas an alliance can break, this is not very easy.

The Front is the weaker of these marriages. It is essentially transient and fragile. Yet some fronts can and do develop into alliances as a result of interaction built in co-operation in struggle. Organisations entering a front may not agree on the key questions of the struggle or that stage to which they belong, but they may agree on this or that course of action based on a minimum consensus established through democratic debates among these organisations in the relevant structures of the front. Just like in the case of an alliance, organisations in the **front** retain their **independence**.

A front or an alliance is merely an umbrella. When the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed on 20 August 1983 at Mitchells Plain, Cape Town, a front as an umbrella of numerous organisations was formed. The affiliate organisations did not necessarily have the same objectives, still some may not have had any definite and organised vision of the future at the time. But they were all agreed on the need to take action and the course of that action around the immediate demands of our people – among them were opposition to the Koornhof Bills, tricameral parliament, ethnic referenda etc.

From its inception and for some time, the UDF was run in accordance with the true ethics of a front. Organisations elected the leadership of the Front at the Annual General Meetings, issues were debated and agreement (minimum consensus) reached at General Councils held every two months; organisations remained independent and paid their subscription fees; all leadership members and functionaries were seconded by organisations and remained accountable to organisations – there were no floating members of the leadership who could only be described as UDF and had no other organisations to which they were attached.

It was during these times that the UDF's growth in organisational terms and influence was phenomenal. Never before have our people been so united in their diversity and never before have mass united struggles reached such unprecedented levels of sustenance and co-ordination. Creativity, ingenuity, imagination and independent initiative of our masses on the ground was an accepted and encouraged order of the day.

In many parts of our country our people had developed a sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency and held both delegates and leaders accountable to them. National sectors such as Cosas and other organisations could raise funds wherever they wished but within the policy of the Front without let nor hinder. These times saw our people covering great distances in their march to freedom. It was during such periods of heightened mass action that the imagination, ingenuity, creativity and initiative of our people were set free and, for the first time in our history, we saw organs of people's power emerging and developing on a nationwide scale.

Non-racialism as our perspective in struggle won hegemony as the Freedom Charter was adopted independently by one organisation after another. This marked a definite development of the Front and the growing leadership and centrality of the vanguard movement, the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies – the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu).

Another nodal point in the development of the United Democratic Front was reached when it successfully facilitated the formation of the national sectoral organisation of workers – the Congress of South African Trade Unions – which remained independent but not hostile to the Front and later developed to become an ally of other sectors in the UDF within the ambit of what is now known as the Mass Democratic Movement. Within the UDF, important national sectors such as the South African Youth Congress (Sayco) emerged. This changed the whole complexion of the UDF.

But unfortunately this situation was not to last. Repression set in and intensified; what began as precautionary, tentative and protective measures, such as the anathema of limited centralisation in the Front, snowballed and became monsters and dinosaurs of over-centralisation, gobbling most of the hitherto achievements of the UDF in as far as the Front ethos are concerned. Factionalism was the inevitable consequence, backed by the stifling of genuine debates, concentration of resources and decision-making processes in fewer and fewer and sometimes faceless hands and the unequal and undemocratic distribu-

tion of such resources. The Front was infected by a serious case of cancer called the Cabal. The cadre-ship and leadership of the UDF thinned as more and more people were marginalised while some simply called it a day in the face of the frustrating inability to any longer make meaningful contributions in the Front.

Like mushrooms, committees, projects, "resource" centres etc. began to crop up in the name of the United Democratic Front but without any accountability to the organisations that constitute the UDF. Some are not even known to certain structures of the UDF.

In the name of "security", organisations and the masses of our people lost their right to elect or determine the leadership of the United Democratic Front. Co-optation, which method should normally not cause any problems, became a thorn in the flesh of the UDF because it was undemocratic and tended to bury the whole issue of accountability and organised development of leadership.

At the level of ideology, important principles of the National Liberation Revolution such as African leadership and the vanguard role of the working class were openly and brazenly flouted. Nay, even an attempt to refer to them was not viewed positively. In the process, the mass component in the approach to our struggle was sacrificed – it became incidental and no longer normative.

This disregard of principle led to an anomalous situation in which the Front tended to operate like an organisation and not a Front of organisations. This drastically reduced the capability of the UDF to effectively employ the tactic of a United Front. On numerous occasions organisations within the Front have had to come out and fight against decisions said to be of the UDF but which no single organisation is known to have proposed and presented to others for discussion and consideration. It was clear through this tendency that organisations within the UDF no longer had the right to initiate and decide the Front politics. We must say that certain of these faceless decisions have more than once threatened the very existence of the UDF in the way in which they created dissatisfaction and anger in the UDF.

At other times, decisions would be presented to the NEC, not be any organisation, but by certain individuals who falsely claimed that such decisions originated in the Head Office when the rest of the members of the Head Office knew nothing about such decisions. This tendency clearly pointed to the existence of some group or structure outside the normal structures of the UDF that made decisions for the Front.

In a situation where the Front does not have any forum for political discussion but still sees papers distributed as "position" papers of the Front, who can deny the existence of such an "outside" decision-making impostor and be honest at the same time? It is an unfortunate analogy but one that is inescapable to point out, that where the apartheid regime wielded its state security council, on our side there existed a cabal or a grouping outside the Front that saw itself as either the think-tank or the custodians of all wisdom in the UDF. We must say ours is even worse in the sense that its existence was never officially acknowledged nor its origin traceable within the Front. It is truly faceless. We dispute the assertion that the existence of such a grouping is either fiction or a matter of belief and/or perception. It is not a matter of faith on the part of the masses of our people. To make such claims in the face of genuine massive complaints on the part of our people is to be dishonest and disrespectful of the intelligence of our members and people. It makes all efforts to resolve the problem a sham and only a means to cover up.

The complaints of our people and the demand for an investigation into the matters they complain of are part of their life experience in the Front and not superstition at all.

No-one within the UDF who is true to the principles of organisation and Fronts can deny without contradiction that:

i) Within the UDF undemocratic practices have developed on a scale and level that is upsetting and disturbing.

ii) Within and "outside" the UDF, resources are concentrated in fewer hands and are distributed unequally and in accordance with undemocratic and anti-organisation considerations and are used to control rather than to help those who receive them. The basis for employment of functionaries of the Front has been particularly dismaying. There are so many resource and project centres existing in the name of the UDF, but who do they in practice serve? Who has decided on their existence within the UDF? Why are these resources concentrated only in certain towns and regions while the rest of the country is suffering? Even worse, why are the people – the sectors and groups in whose name these resources have been created and motivated for – not in control?

iii) ascendency into leadership structures of the UDF is now by the route of undemocratic co-optation where organisations play no role at all. We are not against co-optation as a method of replenishing the Front's leadership.

These and other problems within the UDF must, among other things political, serve as a basis for the restructuring of the UDF. The restructuring of the UDF must banish these undemocratic practices and set the UDF on a more dynamic and mass-orientated basis from which it must develop into a true foundation of national unity. To found such a Front is the urgent task of the National Liberation Movement. To begin from a false and dishonest basis in restructuring the UDF will be disastrous to the mass struggles of our people.

The UDF is the beginning of this Front of national unity which we the youth would like to see growing,

expanding and covering the majority of our people as a major organ of mass activation, mobilisation, politicisation and action accountable to the masses and their National Liberation Movement. Let our people be in control of their organisations, their Front, through their affiliated and independent structures. Let our people speak in one voice which is their minimum-consensus-by debate: the United Front.

We must advise that the process towards resolving these problems of the UDF will not be served by conducting a witch-hunt, by either those who seek the solution nor those who were responsible for these practices. No-one must however be covered who has been responsible for these undemocratic practices. Criticism and self-criticism that is open is the norm of a democratic organisation.

The task is to unfold a stubborn, persistent and systematic programme within the UDF which must correct these deviations and distortions and introduce and safeguard democratic practices within our Front in such a way that our people can see and experience. Incrimination and recrimination cannot achieve this.

These and many other negative outgrowths developed and began to show. Political stagnation at the level of leadership set in, well out of step with the growing fighting mood on the ground on the part of the masses.

The tragedy, however, is not that these things happen, but that even the seemingly most advanced of our cadreship preferred to keep quiet about them and did not speak out against them. Indeed, it was unfortunate when some adopted the route of always trying to find justification for these deviations and distortions, and at times even tried to find faults with those who raised them.

Fortunately, we in the youth movement, SAYCO, have never kept quiet about them and have many times consistently raised our voices in objection and demanded a thorough-going restructuring based on the consolidation, advancement and defence of the United Democratic Front of which we are a proud, resolute and major affiliate.

We are still saying that the task of restructuring the United Democratic Front fundamentally is the urgent question of our time in the National Liberation Movement and the Mass Democratic Movement. Such a restructuring process must correct these distortions and deviations that we speak of. It must premise itself on the truism that: the masses are the makers of their own revolution and history; that the revolution is the festival of the oppressed and exploited; and that it is a process conducted by millions of people who want to see oppression as their life experience changed and replaced by a life-experience known as freedom: from the masses to the masses must be our catchword.

As SAYCO we believe that with such restructuring taken up rigorously, unflinchingly, systematically, stubbornly and persistently, we can and must make it a point that this new decade, the last decade of the second millennium, becomes the Decade of Mass United and Determined Action for a decisive transference of Power. With all our organisations, leadership and cadreship gearing themselves for the tasks that lie ahead, readying themselves to intervene timeously and effectively each time our history takes a turn, we can and must mark this decade as the last one in which our people are victims of apartheid colonialism.

Consequently we, as SAYCO, propose that the following principles be taken into undivided consideration when we restructure the United Democratic Front:

NOTES ON THE PRINCIPLES OF THE UNITED FRONT

1. A front is not a monolith of anti-apartheid forces in general. It is based on actual classes and strata with common, different and sometimes contradictory aims. Each of these forces has an "own interest" to pursue which, in the context of the front, coincide with the interests of others. Yet it views the Front from its own perspective and with goals to pursue which might even contradict those of other forces.

The Vietnamese veteran revolutionary and strategist, code General Le Duan, says a front is: "a unity of opposites". In our situation, the forces interested in the victory of the national democratic revolution would of necessity be the most consistent within the coalition. The African section of the working class in particular and the black workers in general pursue thorough-going revolutionary democracy. Their pivotal and crucial position and role in the struggle cannot be disputed by any but the most obtuse. Most of the motive forces of the revolution recognise them as the vanguard, and many among them share their long-term perspectives.

If the main content of the present stage of our revolution is the national liberation of the African majority in particular and the black people in general, then both our organisational formations and projections as instruments of struggle must not only reflect this but conduct and prosecute our struggle on the basis of this in such a way that our people can see.

2. The mode of operation of a Front is debate that must lead to action based on the minimum consensus reached by participating organisations. Participation in the Front therefore entails "compromise". Participating organisations are "compelled" by their membership to the Front to find areas of common agreement which do not necessarily include all their positions. The end of debate in the Front is the end of that Front.

3. The "compromise" is, of course, qualified in the sense that the revolutionary democratic movement does

not abandon its strategies, forms of struggle nor its campaigns. It proceeds from the premise that its positions are correct and that it is capable of winning over all genuine anti-apartheid forces to those positions and neutralising the rest. The bottom line is active opposition to the regime. In addition to joint actions, various sectors of the Front will have specific tasks and mandates within the programme, in keeping with their peculiar positions.

4. Components of the Front are bound to differ on many issues. Each sector should have the right to retain its **independence**; the freedom to openly express and campaign for its own views etc. etc., as long as these do not aim at defeating the ends of the alliance.

5. Criticism should be conducted – and where necessary this should be done openly. Self-criticism is also important and must be honest and aim at resolving problems rather than smoothing over them. Above all, alliances in which classes historically at loggerheads take part do not mean "class peace". Yet any battles fought within the alliance should be about **issues of principle**.

6. The basic motive forces of the revolution – in particular the working class – and their genuine organisations should help to steer the Front along the right course by exercising effective leadership in practice and theory. They must win recognition as the leader by being effective in struggle; genuinely raising and fighting for the common interest; being consistently democratic in dealing with other parties within the Front. Their organisations have to be strong: organisationally, ideologically and politically. They should co-ordinate among each other without disrespect to the relevant decision-making structures of the Front, i.e. they should not become a conspiracy, a clique or cabal in the running of the affairs of the Front.

In our view, the Front that will emerge as a result of this restructuring must be one:

- based on national sectoral organisations as its main pillars – youth, workers, students, women and civics.

- in which national and regional professional and other interest organisations such as doctors, lawyers, chiefs, traders, cultural, sporting etc. become part.

- non-racialism in both theory and organisational practice is encouraged as the norm.

- the National Executive Committee is drawn from sectors and regional representation. Every UDF executive member must have an organisational base.

- in which regular meetings of the General Council are the only decision-making structures in between Annual General Meetings.

- in which co-optation into the Head Office shall respect democratic principles of accountability to and consultation with all the structures of the Front.

- in which the Head Office and the NEC cannot establish any resource centre, campaign or project without an express mandate of organisations attained at the Front's relevant decision-making structure.

Thus all existing resource centres, projects and campaign committees operating in the name of the Front and/or linkage to the UDF must be re-examined by the Front's constitutional structures.

- Finance and resource allocations and the acquisition of such finances and resources of the Front must be under the control of a Finance sub-committee formed by treasurers of all sectors and regions to which the National Treasurers of the Front must be subordinate.

- in which the constituent organisations remain independent but are bound by decisions reached by consensus in the relevant decision-making structures of the Front in as far as Action is concerned.

Ideology, policies, administration, principles and the constitutions of the independent organisations shall be respected within the Front. Only the decision-making structures of such independent organisations can change or be improved by those organisations' relevant structures.

The policies, programmes and campaigns of the UDF must be the product of minimum consensus reached by all participatory organisations. The NEC, REC Head Office etc. of the Front have no right to unilaterally change any of the Front's policies, constitution, programmes etc.

CONCLUSION

In restructuring the Front we should be honest and objective in our approach. Serious and even brutal questions must be posed and answered. For instance, the question of whether Cosatu as a working class formation should help to develop the Front as a genuine foundation of national unity from outside that Front itself. What does it mean when it is said that there is an alliance between Cosatu and the UDF when the one is a sector while the other is an umbrella for a number of sectors and formations? What does it mean in practice when it is said that Cosatu as a sector and the UDF as a front are the revolutionary core of the Mass Democratic Movement, if a true front is what we have just discussed above. How does such an over-simplification and presumption advance our struggle on the ground. What does it mean to the pledge and need to broaden the Front?

ADDENDUM

We in SAYCO are pleased to report that the UDF NEC finally entertained the issues raised in this paper on the 13th and 14th of January this year, 1990. SAYCO is part of the NEC, represented there by its president and the general secretary.

In this NEC it was agreed that the correct basis on which we must begin our process of rectification and restructuring is to begin with an honest acknowledgement that these undemocratic practices exist in the UDF; that certain areas can clearly be identified where this is most rife.

We therefore agree that the work of the commission that was set up last year to investigate these problems must continue to be aided. In addition to this commission, we also agreed that a definite process within the UDF must unfold which must adequately address this situation. This must be undertaken by all structures of the UDF in all regions and by its affiliated organisations.

As SAYCO we issue a plea and request to all those who have the survival of our UDF and mass struggles at heart to come forward and boldly assist in this process. Avoid gossip and report your complaints and contributions towards the solution to either the commission or the relevant structures of your affiliated organisation.

The aim and the task is still to consolidate, defend and advance our formation in struggle. It is in this way that the tasks we as an oppressed and struggling people set ourselves in this Year of People's Action for a Democratic South Africa can be achieved. Indeed, this is the way which we in SAYCO believe will actually make this the last decade, not only of the second millennium, but also as the last decade of oppression. It must become a decade of heightened Mass Political Action for a Transference of Power.

Therefore:

Strengthen your organisation

Strengthen the UDF

Strengthen and defend the National Liberation Movement