

[role of trade unions in the national liberation struggle] UDF.....1

Our response to this issue must begin by outlining how we see the present political situation. This is because our decision to join the UDF was made as part of our response to certain political events. These events directly affected us both as a trade union, and as people who identify ourselves with the struggle for a free and just South Africa.

There are four main political issues that affect workers today. These four are (a) The increasing push towards Bantustan Independence for all the homelands - and therefore the forcing of Bantustan citizenship on all Black people. (b) The attempt to push through new Pass Laws that will tighten up the control of all workers. The lives of all workers - but more especially contract workers, will become very difficult if this new law is passed. (c) The community council elections that will be held later on this month. This issue is linked to the problem of high rents, high electricity bills and high transport costs. (d) The "New Deal" being pushed by the government in the forthcoming constitution. This issue must be seen as a part of the issues spoken of above. All four of these issues are linked. They are all part of the attempt to ensure that the Apartheid capitalist system can continue to exploit workers by continuing to oppress all black people. We will explain what we mean by this in more detail below. First we will look at why these four issues are so important to black workers.

JOINT UNION  
EDUCATION PROJECT  
ROOM 10, CHESTER HOUSE  
272 JEFFREYS ST., JHB  
TEL. 873421

Bantustan Independence

All black workers are faced with the fact that they and their children are being forced to become citizens of one or other homeland. As these homelands become independent - the situation of the workers from that homeland deteriorates. They are no longer seen as citizens of South Africa but as foreigners coming into South Africa to get a job. The government has made it clear that it hopes to eventually have no more black citizens of South Africa. All black people will be foreigners who can come

into South Africa to work if there are jobs for them. If there are no jobs then they will be sent to the homelands to starve.

The Bantustans are governed by people who are junior partners in the oppression of the black people of South Africa. These "governments" are there to make sure that the large numbers of unemployed and hungry people in the homelands are kept under control. These governments survive only because they are given money and guns by the Botha government. They exist only to oppress the people, and to keep them from rising up against their oppression.

All black workers are faced with the threat of being sent off to rot in a homeland. All black workers must unite to say NO to these Bantustans.

#### The New Pass Laws

The pass laws have always been the way in which the government of South Africa has made it easy for the bosses to exploit black workers. The pass laws control the movements of black workers. These are the laws which make it possible for the government to get rid of any workers who are not needed in the urban areas. These are the laws that have made it possible for the government and the bosses to force black workers into jobs they would never choose to do - on the mines or the farms. But the problem is that the very high numbers of unemployed people and the starvation in the homelands has resulted in people defying the control of the pass laws and coming to town illegally to look for jobs. So the government has decided to tighten up the pass laws in order to make sure that people do not come to the urban areas unless they are needed by the bosses.

The government has also decided that the best way of doing this is to try and divide the workers. The people who have jobs and houses in the urban areas will be given a little more freedom - and all others will be booted out into the

homelands. No rural people will be registered for jobs if there is an urban person who does not have work. Anyone who tries to defy these laws by coming to town illegally will face a large fine and/or a long period in jail. Anyone who gives accomodation to an illegal worker will also face a large fine and/or a long period in jail. Any employer who hires an illegal worker (because he can pay the worker less money) will be fined R5000.00. (This is because the government feels that the problem of control over all black workers is more important than the extra profit that a few bosses can make by employing "illegals").

Even though the urban workers with housing will be given a bit more freedom, their situation is also uncertain. This is because they could lose their position as permanent urban workers and end up in a homeland. The only way forward is to resist the government's attempts to divide workers and unite against these new pass laws.

All black workers are oppressed and controlled by the pass laws. All black workers will be affected by these new pass laws. This is why we must all unite to say NO to the "Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill".

#### The Community Council Elections

The community councils are another attempt to confuse people about who the enemy is. This is done by putting stooges into power in the community councils and then oppressing the people through these stooges. When the Bantu Administration Boards were the people in charge, it was clear who the oppressor was. The U.B.C.'s had so little power that it was clear to everyone that they were dummy bodies. The government then decided to give them a bit more power, change their name, and try to fool the people in this way. But the real power still lies in the hands of the government through the B.A.A.B.'s (Bantu Affairs Administration Boards).

This means that a whole lot of extra money is spent without any benefits for the

people. These community councillors have to be paid high salaries, they need buildings to meet in, cars to ride around in - all in order to carry out the government's dirty work. The workers who live in the townships have to pay for all this. The government not only puts up stooges to do its dirty work for it - but it also tells the people that now that they control their own affairs - they will also have to pay for it all by themselves - no more money from the government. This means that higher rents, higher electricity bills, dog tax and all sorts of other expenses will be forced upon the workers.

If the people complain, then the reply is that they are now in control of their own townships. They must complain to the people they elected. The government is also moving towards giving these councillors the power to oppress the urban people if they resist too much. Community guards - a type of police under the control of the community council - are being spoken about.

All black workers must unite to prevent the situation in the townships becoming like a mini-homeland. We must all unite to say NO to the community council elections.

#### The New Constitution - No More Apartheid?

Botha's "New Deal" is being spoken about as a move away from Apartheid. The idea is that now Indian and Coloured people are being "included", and that this is a step in the right direction. But if we look at this from the position of the black workers, we can see that this "new deal" is just the same old apartheid - the same old oppression. The government is speaking of a new - non-racial - democracy coming about with this "new deal". This can only make sense if we first do away with all black people in South Africa. If there are no black South Africans (- only Transkeians, Vendas, etc) then suddenly the whites are in the majority. Suddenly it becomes possible to include Coloureds and Indians in the government. So this

so-called' move away from Apartheid is only possible thanks to the ultimate result of Apartheid - the banishing of all black South Africans to the Bantustans.

In this way we can see how this "New Deal" is very closely linked to the other issues spoken of above: the "Independence" of the Bantustans - the tightening up of the pass laws - and the new self-government of the townships. The government is hoping to win over the Coloured and Indian people in order to tighten up the oppression of the black people - and most especially - the black workers.

This "New Deal" is trying to divide the oppressed people. This "New Deal" is trying to make sure that the black workers remain under the control of the government. - This "New Deal" will make sure that the black workers are still at the mercy of the bosses.

All black workers and other oppressed people must unite to say NO to this new constitution. We must unite to say NO to the whole package - the constitution and the Koornhof Bills.

#### Who else is affected?

We have spoken of the way in which black workers are affected by this 'package deal'. We can see that the Apartheid capitalist system in our country is fighting to survive. The people are resisting and all sorts of problems are surfacing. This "New Deal" - and the Koornhof Bills - are attempts by the government to face the challenges made by the people's resistance. We have seen how this tightening up of Apartheid laws will make it easier for the bosses to continue the exploitation of black workers. The government is passing these laws in order to make sure that the black working class is tightly controlled in the urban areas - and kicked out to the homelands when workers are no longer needed.

But these laws are also part of the Apartheid system that oppresses many people from other classes and other communities. All black people - and Indian and Coloured people - are oppressed by these laws. The black workers are the largest and most oppressed group. This is why black workers will be the most dedicated and hardworking people in the struggle. But black workers are not the only oppressed people. We must stand together with all people willing to fight for a free and just South Africa. We must unite to oppose this "New Deal" and the Koornhof Bills. Only in this way can we mobilise the widest possible grouping of people to reject continued oppression.

We must recognise that within this broad unity of people - there will be differences of approach - different levels of understanding - different ideas about the kind of society we are fighting for. This does not matter. We are united in our opposition to Apartheid and its effects on all black people. The black workers will put all their might behind a thrust to do away with Apartheid and the injustices and inequalities that it has resulted in.

We believe that this cannot be done without a total change in the type of society that has been created by the Apartheid capitalist system in South Africa.

### Trade Unions and the Struggle .

Our stand on these issues is clear - But how can we oppose them effectively? Trade Unions are not political parties. Trade Unions are organisations of workers - uniting to fight for the rights of workers and to defend these rights on the shopfloor. Our Trade Unions are also committed to fighting for a society in which all workers are free. But we cannot pretend that all our members are politically conscious people who would wholeheartedly get involved in the struggle. Our strength lies in our ability to unite in the workplaces with the possibility of stopping production. This

happens mainly around some of the immediate problems facing workers in that workplace. The structures of our unions exist to enable workers to deal with problems in the workplace as they arise. Because union structures bring workers together to discuss problems - it becomes possible for political issues to be discussed. However, it is very difficult for a trade union to launch and control political campaigns - as well as function effectively as the first line of defense of the workers. This is why it is very difficult for us - as trade unions - to respond effectively to political issues. While admitting all this, we must say at the same time that it is our duty as trade unionists in South Africa to be part of the struggle for freedom and justice. Our problem is therefore to find the most effective way of doing this - despite the limitations of our organisations. This brings us to the need for alliances with other organisations.

### Alliances

In South Africa, the main political organisations are banned. We are thus faced with finding ways of responding - together with other groupings of oppressed people - to the main political struggles occurring inside our country. Many other organisations - like student groupings or community organisations - have a similar problem. They are formed to fight some of the basic problems that occur amongst the people they are organising. They are not political parties. If they spent all their time functioning as political groupings - they would lose touch with their base. Ordinary people have to be drawn into the process of struggle - they do not come rushing in by themselves. Ordinary people need to learn - through the process of struggling to change some of the immediate problems around them - how and why these immediate problems (like high rents, bad teaching, etc.) are part of broader political problems. In this sense - the difficulties these groups have in responding effectively to political issues are similar to those faced by the unions. This is why we have all responded so eagerly to the formation of the U.D.F.

## The U.D.F. and the Crisis

Everybody today seems to be talking about the crisis. Well, the reality is that the present system of domination and exploitation isn't working too well. So the government has a crisis on its hands. The "New Deal" and the Koornhof Bills are the government's attempt to resolve this crisis by bringing in a shiny new model. This new model is supposed to make sure that the crisis becomes a thing of the past and that domination and exploitation live on ... happily ever after. It's up to us to make sure that this doesn't happen.

This means that the present political situation demands a far greater and more united response than we have managed for a very long time. By ourselves - whether we are unions/community organisations/students or whatever - we will achieve very little. The present situation calls for the kind of united response that can bring together the strengths and talents of as many different groupings of people as possible. Churches, unions, community organisations, students, youth groups, women's groups and groups of activists - committees of all kinds - all of these should unite to resist this new 'package deal'.

The problem then becomes how to bring all these different types of organisations together. Herein lies the strength of an organisation like the U.D.F. In the real sense of the word -the UDF is not an organisation at all. It's a rallying point. It's the focus of a range of different types of energies. It represents the pooling of resources; the co-operation of a range of very different, autonomous organisations. It is a form of unity in action -but not in structure/form or detailed policy. It is an attempt to create the broadest possible unity in opposition to this specific political situation. It serves as a means of bringing people together. It serves as a forum to sort through the differences that may arise between these groupings - but only those differences that may serve as a



stumbling block to this united opposition. All other differences are irrelevant to the project of the U.D.F.

The U.D.F. also serves as a symbol of our determination to oppose oppression to the end. The election of presidents and patrons should be understood for their symbolic value - rather than as a set of very complicated structures. The individuals involved were chosen because they are symbols of our struggle - symbols of determination; of courage and of the history of our struggle. It is in all these ways that the U.D.F. is a United Front of a broad range of organisations and not a unitary (or even a federal) structure.

As far as the operation of the U.D.F. is concerned, this means that the programmes of the U.D.F. must be carried out primarily through the organisations that identify themselves with the U.D.F. The shared planning process, the pooling of resources and the employment of a number of full-time personnel by the U.D.F.; all these things ensure that member organisations of the U.D.F. receive a lot of support in the process of carrying out these programmes.

The most interesting result of the excitement and activity generated by the U.D.F. so far, has been the emergence of a whole range of new organisations that then join the U.D.F.. A number of youth organisations and civic organisations have emerged throughout the country to take up the U.D.F. banner. These organisations exist as autonomous entities - although they have emerged as a result of the existence of the U.D.F. They will now be able to grow, consolidate their base, foster new leadership and continue to function long after the UDF ceases to exist. But what about unions? What kind of role should they play in the U.D.F.?

#### Unions and the U.D.F.

Unions are working class organisations. They exist both as a means to fight for

the rights of workers - and as a training ground which enables workers to develop skills in organisation and leadership. The development of these skills - as well as the growing confidence that this generates amongst workers - are essential elements in the development of the working class struggle.

The main limitation of all unions is that their structure and way of operating tends to push them towards focussing only on economic issues - to the exclusion of political issues. This can only be overcome by associating ourselves - as a trade union - with the political struggles going on around us. In this way we can achieve two goals at the same time: (a) we can oppose the tendency towards economism by clearly stating our commitment - as trade unionists - to the broader struggle for freedom. This challenges all the workers that we organise to also examine their role in these terms; and (b) by actively participating in these struggles, we can influence their direction and goals. Worker leaders, emerging from the training ground of the unions, can take their places amongst the leadership of the political struggle. Workers - organised through the unions - can participate actively in the process of struggle. If this active participation occurs - the large number of workers involved will be a tremendous boost to the political struggle and will help to ensure that the aims of the struggle are controlled by the workers.

What alternatives do we have if we reject participation in bodies like the UDF?

Some would argue that unions are working class bodies and in the interests of working class autonomy we must 'go it alone'. The unions should be part of an independent initiative against the "new deal". This independent opposition group should consist only of unions. Even if we felt this to be a good idea (which we don't) we would oppose it on the grounds that we spoke of above: a union is not a political organisation and for as long as it continues to function as a union - it cannot effectively fulfill the role of a political organisation. The other alternative would be for the unions

to support/encourage the setting up of a "Workers' Party" that will lead the workers in the struggle against the "new deal". This type of political grouping - it is argued - would ensure that the political goals of the working class are promoted. We disagree with this position for the following reasons.

(a) No 'working class party' is ever composed only of workers. Anyone who is prepared to fight for the kind of fundamental changes that would enable workers to be free would be welcome in any working class party. This also points to the mistake of assuming that all workers are somehow automatically committed to the struggle for fundamental change. It is true that a progressive political direction can most naturally take root amongst the working class - it is not true that a political leadership composed of workers is automatically progressive. Nor is it true that a political leadership composed of workers will guarantee that the interests of the workers are promoted by that leadership.

We believe that a truly fundamental change in this society can only occur if the workers are actively involved in the process of struggle. This is because the workers are one of the most down-trodden and oppressed classes in our society - as well as having a very important role in the functioning of our Apartheid capitalist society. This gives workers the kind of power that other oppressed classes - like the rural poor people (peasants) - don't have. The question then arises - In what way should workers be involved in the struggle? This leads us to the second objection that we have to the idea of a workers' party 'going it alone'.

(b) We mentioned - in the first part of our discussion - the fact that it is the black workers of South Africa who have suffered most under the various parts of the Apartheid capitalist system. This is because this system functions in such a way as to enable the bosses to make the highest possible profits - at the expense of the workers. Many other people have also suffered terribly at the hands of this system - the rural poor people for example. It is because we believe that the oppression of black workers is at the root of the broader oppression of all black people in South

Africa - that we advocate the widest possible unity of all oppressed people to fight this system.

Some who will unite with us will not be prepared to go as far as we will on the road to freedom - but because it is the same road - we can unite and work together. Some believe that we will be betrayed by those who would get rid of racial discrimination but are not too keen to shake things up any further. Our reply to this is quite simple.

We believe that it is impossible to separate off Apartheid from the capitalist system it has fed. A truly committed opposition to Apartheid (and its consequences) will lay the foundations for a fundamental change in the entire system in South Africa. Our present struggle does not have to be based on some abstract 'ideal society' of the future. A struggle which aims to get rid of Apartheid - to get rid of the homelands - to get rid of the inequality bred by Apartheid, inequalities of wealth, land, education, etc. This kind of struggle - if taken to its logical conclusion - will undermine the foundations of Apartheid capitalism. The rest is up to us.

The importance of this kind of struggle is its ability to unite the widest possible range of oppressed people. The path of the struggle is the same for all of us-- how far down the path we go will depend on our efforts. It's up to the unions and all other progressives to ensure that the organised workers are fully involved in the process of struggle - that worker leaders emerge and take up positions amongst the political leadership - that progressives unite to ensure a struggle for truly fundamental change in South Africa.

These are our reasons for joining the UDF. We encourage all other progressives to do the same.