

Need an intro already what UDF is.

THE UDF: A "WORKERIST" RESPONSE

The following comments are offered not in the spirit of divisiveness nor as an invective against popular movement but should rather be viewed as a contribution to a debate which the authors of this article believe should neither be confined to organisational leadership nor intellectuals but be carried as far and as broadly as possible. The contents in this article have been formed by the authors' experience of the UDF in Cape Town; it could conceivably be different in other centres.

The nature of the UDF

The UDF is generally viewed as a popular front. As we understand the term, a popular front is a loose working alliance of organisations representing more than one class. All organisations enter into the front with their own ideological positions yet all are united behind the minimum program of the front. Any organisation willing to subscribe to the minimum programme can become a member of the front. The front is not an organisation in itself - ie. it does not have its own constitution and has a minimum of office bearers.

The UDF has some aspects of a front, some of an organisation. It was formed with a constitution and a plethora of office bearers and executives. Organisation proceeds locally in the name of the UDF yet the impetus from local committees to the executive is channeled via representatives of the signatory organisations. For example, a committee on the Cape Flats might have a dozen members of a women's organisation; the local committee of the UDF might eventually reach the size of 100, including individuals who are not members of organisations affiliated to the UDF. In such cases it would remain the province of the 12 members of the women's organisation, via their organisation's membership of the UDF as a whole, to be chosen as representatives on the central committee. What this means is that the UDF operates locally as an organisation, regionally or provincially as a front. Objectively this diminishes the democratic character of the UDF.

Decision making in the UDF

As we have pointed out, the channels for participation of the local committees in the executive decision making are poorly constructed. Those that exist seem to run mostly in the other direction - to implement policy rather than form it.

A word must be said about the current fashion for debating issues by means of workshops. Proponents of "small groups" claim that people are shy to talk in big meetings; and are scared for security reasons of saying what they think. To which we must reply: what security reasons? The UDF is not a clandestine organisation - all debate and opinion should be freely and openly expressed. And what kind of leadership training is being offered

members if they are not encouraged and taught to speak in big meetings? While we might concede that workshops enable the issues at hand to be discussed fully we regard small groups as being entirely unsuitable for decision making. By selection of group leaders and with undue attention being paid in the report backs to minority opinions within the group, workshops function either to paralyse decision making or else to reinforce our opinion that very often these meetings are used to rubber stamp decisions taken elsewhere.

This also explains partly the attitude towards trade unionists. Because the UDF is not run on decisions taken at the base and carried upwards, when unionists speak of "The workers feeling that..." or "The workers say this...", it is assumed that these are the personal opinions of the speaker merely projected as the desires of the workers. The essence of trade union democracy, the big meeting with opinions from the floor expressed for or against resulting in a decision binding on officials, is absent from the UDF. And hence the myth that union officials and office bearers are holding the workers back from joining the UDF.

Constituent organisations of the UDF and the nature of the ideology expressed

A closer look must be paid to the organisations which have joined the UDF. These can be divided into three groups:

1) "Non-mainline" organisations (eg Church groups, Trades Organisations etcetera). These clearly are petit bourgeois in membership and program.

2) Student/Youth organisations. These are mixed in membership and program with the radical petit bourgeoisie probably dominating working class elements overall.

3) Community organisations (eg The Cape Housing Action Committee (CAHAC) and the United Women's Organisation (UWO)). These are a little more difficult to pigeon-hole. Clearly both organisations do have working class members and even working class branches. However, if we look at these organisations several tendencies can be drawn out:

a) The organisations are locally very weak with a small membership mostly confined to people with experience of other opposition organisations.

b) Their programs are generally limited, eg. agitation around the issue of rents without drawing out clearly the link to wages and hence economic exploitation at the site of production.

c) Within the organisations attempts are made to blur class distinctions and consequent differences in aims - the "We are all oppressed women" or "We are all oppressed residents" approach. The fact that the political aims of a working class woman and a non-working class woman living in the same community would be very different is glossed over.

d) While we cannot identify accurately the class composition of the membership of these organisations, the leadership is on

the whole dominated by intellectuals with a reformist ideology.

This ideology tends to play down the class nature of society and instead makes a fetish of the racial aspect. All attention is focused on the political, on Apartheid, leading to the assumption that the dismantling of the Apartheid state will necessarily lead to a "free, democratic, united South Africa". The question of class domination by the bourgeoisie is left unattended. There is little or no attempt to develop a class analysis of the society and to illustrate to the working class who the real enemy is and that inequality, domination, poverty and unemployment are intrinsic to the capitalist system. The radical petit bourgeoisie instead sees the working class as too unsophisticated to understand the nature of their exploitation. From this premise flows the belief that race is to be concentrated upon as the most overt form that domination takes in South Africa. This in turn accentuates the tendency often to organise on colour lines and secondly often to view genuine working class organisations with disdain.

The platform of the UDF is simple: down with the Constitutional Proposals, an end to Apartheid. While no progressive would argue with these admirable aims it is obvious that these are not the priorities of the working class. The workers seek an end to economic exploitation which is not necessarily synonymous with the end to Apartheid.

The UDF might argue that this is the minimum program alluded to earlier. But where is the evidence that any more thoroughgoing socialist program would be acceptable to the UDF? Where are the different ideological trends in the UDF in accordance with the multi-class alliance we are led to believe exists?

We have seen recently in Zimbabwe just where such a populism - called "reconciliation" there - has lead: to the complete suppression of working class politics and the institution of a classical neo-colonialist solution (ie. unabated exploitation with a change of personnel at the top).

In summary we can categorise the political program of the UDF as radical petit bourgeois.

And the Workers?

While there definitely are individual workers who are members of the UDF there is as yet no working class organisation of any size which has joined. We are not ashamed to express the view that the working class should lead the opposition movement. This is for many reasons - mainly that only the working class has clear objective reasons for pursuing an alternative to the present system of economic exploitation. While other classes and groups, notably the radical middle class and radical intellectuals, might oppose the system with great courage and persistence the alternative they envisage, because of their class position, will generally fall short of that of the working class.

The UDF might answer that they have tried every method to include working class organisations in this "popular front"; that this failure is short-sightedness on the part of the Trade Unions rather than the UDF. The authors of this article cannot agree. While one may justifiably criticise the unions for failing to open up the debate on the UDF, their affiliation would have been foolhardy. The UDF offered its constitution to the unions on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. There was no room for compromise, no suggestion that the existing leadership should step aside for the worker's leaders. Taken in conjunction with the anti-democratic tendencies touched upon above plus the reluctance of the UDF to situate their opposition in class terms, any formal contribution by the unions to the UDF would have been a betrayal to their hard won independence.

Ideological Intolerance

We cannot leave the question of the UDF without looking briefly at the pervasive attempts to smother progressive opposition to its central propositions. The line of the UDF, emanating from somewhere, is not to be opposed, we are told. To criticise the UDF is tantamount to being an impimpi, to running with the nationalist government. Former friends cross the road when they see a "workerist" approaching; a series of pitched battles is being fought in academic circles and even on committees only marginally political in operation.

The Future

We criticise the UDF harshly; but only in terms of what it should be. The UDF with the dynamism and hard work of its militants has opened a whole new vista of struggle and, we freely admit, has in places organised the previously unorganised workers and non-workers.

We do not believe the UDF is an adequate vehicle to carry forward the struggle for a democratic socialist South Africa - but it could be.

We call upon all progressive workers and intellectuals to enter the UDF. Most of all to re-open the debate on the place of the working class in the opposition movement; to carry on the debate loudly, broadly and publicly so that a new re-alignmet in opposition can be realised.

A United Democratic Front under the leadership of the working class committed to ending exploitation at home and in the factory - that is a front we will support.

In conclusion we reiterate that we would welcome a response to our brief comments either in these columns or in any other.

(Isabella Silver and Alexia Sfarnas, Cape Town, September, 1983)