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**Democratic opposition:
The progressive movement
in South Africa**

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Edited text of a speech delivered by Alet
van Heerden, to both the NUSAS Con-
gress in Durban and to a joint sitting of
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The progressive movement in South Africa is a young one. Although part of a tradition of struggle which began early this century, this current phase of organisation and struggle only really began in late 1977. If our movement for democracy is to reach its full potential we are going to have to look very carefully at what we have achieved over the last couple of years – at our gains and at our losses. And we must use that assessment to plan where we go from here.

So in my talk, I want to rely on Amilcar Cabral's dictum that we should tell no lies and claim no easy victories. I want to start off by asking why we organise. Why do we even bother to spend so much time, so much energy, so much money, and make the sacrifices that we do to organise people? Now this may seem like a very simple question but I think that its answer has contained within it a number of subtle aspects that we don't often examine and debate.

Obviously we are trying to involve people in organisation so that they can change their lives. People are suffering; they have problems and grievances; and the only way that they can change that, is if they organise and struggle and change their lives.

So the very first aspect of why we organise is that we want to involve people in organisations. We want to provide them with the means for changing their lives. And yet if we look at our organisations, be they the trade unions, the students and women's groups, the community organisations, we so often see that the people are not involved in those organisations.

The form of organisation and the ways in which we have attempted to mobilize have often not made it possible for people to participate. So we end up with organisations consisting only of leaders who make press statements and address meetings and issue pamphlets but with few ordinary working people involved.

The first point I want to make then is that if we are to change our society, if we are to liberate ourselves, we are going to have to directly involve people in organisation and struggle. However, here we enter into a second problem, another one of the subtle aspects that I mentioned earlier. When we try to involve people in organisation and struggle we do so from a position of awareness. We have analysed the situation, understood that particular form of oppression and decided to mobilize against it.

But the people as a whole very often don't share the same level of awareness that we enjoy. They most probably haven't analysed the situation, but even if they have, we must not forget that our socialisation, education and information through the family, the school, the church, the newspapers and T.V. are all designed to mask the real nature of oppression and exploitation in our society.

But for most people, the struggle for survival is more important than any other struggle, and they are forced to spend 18 hours of their day just trying to keep themselves alive. It's very difficult for them, under those circumstances, to be analysing their society and deciding on organisation and change.

So we are going to have to appeal to people on the basis of issues which they see as important and which they can identify with. But, by the same token, we are going to have to use those issues to educate people, to raise their awareness.

Let's say we decided to oppose a rent increase. People may identify with the issue and support the community organisation, organising *the campaign against the increase*. But, even if the campaign is a success and the rent increase is scrapped, we won't necessarily have changed our society at all. Workers will still be paid poverty wages, people will still be forced to live in squalid townships, political rights will still be denied to the majority of South Africans.

Precisely because most people are unaware and unpoliticized, the issues which they see as important are likely to be local, specific grievances, which are seldom overtly political, and their demands are unlikely to be political or even progressive.

So, we have to take up issues which the people themselves see as important but at the same time we cannot leave those issues there. We have to try to develop them from what may be entirely reformist demands which could easily be met within the current framework of South African society, into progressive political demands which would ultimately require fundamental change.

The two elements of our answer to the question "Why do we organise" that we have identified so far then, are the democratic participation of people in struggles to change their lives and the education of people through these struggles.

Now if we look back at organisation in the '70's, we see that most of them failed to involve people and their demands were largely addressed to an already politicized audience. They were never really able to reach the working class, what some people call the grassroots. But by 1977 people had started reflecting very critically on the first five or six years of the '70's and realizing their mistakes, developed an entirely different approach to organisation, an approach which in fact made progressive organisation possible for maybe the first time in twenty years.

What they started to look at was not the issues which we as a politicised, relatively organised community saw as important, but issues which the people saw as important. So we saw organisation springing up in constituencies where no organisation existed before. We saw the growth of community organisations, women's organisations. We saw the consolidation of student organisation in AZASO and COSAS. A number of new trade unions emerged. Activists began concentrating on grassroots, democratic participative organisation. Organisations began taking up issues which many people had previously regarded as reformist, collaborationist or non-political. Before 1977 many organisations would have scoffed at the notion of negotiating with education or township authorities.

A more strategic approach to organisation and struggle emerged. The grassroots organisations taking these issues up realised for the first time in many years that these issues were not ends in themselves. In the first place, the victories that can be won at that level of organisation which can lessen the burdens which people have to bear every day is fighting an important struggle and winning an important victory.

But people realised that there is a lot more potential to these issues. They serve as a starting point which can be developed and broadened out to touch on fundamental political questions. This is a vital qualification, because although the local, specific issues which people see as important have a potential to organise, mobilize and educate people, they must never be seen as ends-in-themselves.

Organisations taking up issues like high rentals, poor school conditions, low wages and high bus fares will draw support from people because they are directly affected. And these issues definitely have a potential to educate people. But that potential is a limited one. What we've found though, is that as soon as that organisation attempts to

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Organisations taking up issues like high rentals, poor school conditions, low wages and high bus fares will draw support from people because they are directly affected. And these issues definitely have a potential to educate people. But that potential is a limited one. What we've found though, is that as soon as that organisation attempts to

extend the issue beyond the question of rentals, it begins to lose support because people regard it as falling outside the realm of their immediate interests.

I recall an incident during the 1980 school boycotts which were characterised by a militant and radical rhetoric. Yet when Wits students approached boycotting coloured pupils on the West Rand of Johannesburg and asked them to sign a petition calling for the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, they refused on the grounds that it was a political demand whereas their boycott was not.

What I'm saying is that while these organisations have a capacity to organise, mobilize and educate people around issues particular to their constituents, their ability to extend them into other issues and into political issues is limited. So we run a real risk of being trapped at this first level of organising people around specific community, factory, student or women's issues which will not allow the organisation, being defined in a particular way, to extend beyond them and instil a political awareness in their supporters.

There are two implications in what I am saying. Firstly, the local, specific problems which our community, factory, students and women's organisations take up have a potential to organise, mobilize and educate which must be maximised, but that ultimately these organisations and the issues they take up fall within the framework of our current society. We need organisations making demands which cannot be met within the framework of an oppressive and exploitative society. Organisation which is not confined to one particular group of people and their specific problems but which straddles racial, regional and sexual boundaries; which does not organise us as residents of a particular community or workers in a particular industry, but as oppressed and exploited people demanding a democratic way of life.

The second implication then is that we need a second level of explicitly political organisation, mobilisation and education which goes beyond the individual battles waged by Resident's Associations, Trade Unions, and so on. Such a political organisation could not exist without those first level organisations, however, because it is through involvement in them that people are made aware of their capacity to organise and change their lives and at the same time such first level organisation would ultimately be meaningless if it were not supplemented by a second level of political organisation and struggle. There's

a reciprocal, or shall I say dialectical relationship between the two levels of organisation.

Let us look at some examples of what we mean by first and second level organisation. The importance of developing first level issues to a point where certain overall political demands can be made was well demonstrated in the struggle to save the Crossroads squatter camp. The wives and children of contract workers were being arrested and sent back to the bantustans. They'd get back to the bantustans and find it impossible to survive because of the almost total lack of employment or means of subsistence. And so at great risk to themselves they would come back to Crossroads, would again be arrested and endorsed out to the bantustans.

A number of Church and Welfare organisations, working with Crossroads residents, opposed the removals on the grounds that families had a God-given right to live together. It was a demand which drew a lot of support from the community and from local and international organisations. But having defined it as an issue of family life, they never took it any further.

This left the door wide open for Piet Koornhof to come in and say that he too, as a Christian, was concerned about the separation of *these families and to grant the wives and children affected temporary permits to remain in the Western Cape*. It also allowed Koornhof to make a lot of capital about the dismantling of apartheid whereas nothing had changed. Those squatters still had no permanent right to remain in the Western Cape, so-called "illegals" all over the country were still being hunted down and sent to bantustans, black people still had no meaningful political rights. And yet Koornhof had apparently met the demand for those families to live together.

The issue, however, could have been approached in an entirely different way. Family life could still have been the initial rallying point, but the issue could then have been moved on to a second phase by asking why the families were being separated. The answer would have been – migrant. The focus of resistance could then have become the migrant labour system. The issue could then have been extended beyond that by asking why we have a migrant labour system and the answer to that is that it makes labour cheaper and easier to control. The control and exploitation of labour would then have been spotlighted, making clear that apartheid controls

have the effect of making it easier to control and exploit labour, and that even if we were to dismantle apartheid we would still have to free ourselves from exploitation.

We could contrast the Crossroads experience with an example drawn from the Meat Strike in 1980. Workers struck because management refused to accept their right to democratically elect non-racial factory committees to represent them instead of the racially separate committees management was insisting on.

The Union stressed that the demand of the workers in the factory was echoed on a national level by the demand of the majority of our people to democratically elect political representatives on a non-racial basis. In this way they linked their specific factory demand to a national political demand.

Turning to the issue of second level political organisation, there are a number of examples from the last couple of years from which we need to draw lessons. Looking at the progressive movement we see that organisation in the communities, factories, and amongst women and students expanded and developed from late '77 to '81. From 1979 however, the objective political climate changed and thrust a new level of activity on these emerging first level organisations. It began with the Fattis and Monis boycott in 1979 which brought community, labour and student groups all over the country together in support of the striking Fattis and Monis workers. We then moved to the Release Mandela Campaign, from there into the school boycotts, then into rent, bus and meat boycotts, then into the anti-Republic Day campaign, from the anti-Republic Day campaign into the anti-SAIC campaign and the anti-Ciskei independence campaign.

We saw spontaneous riots and protests in townships in places like Bloemfontein and Kimberly. In Bloemfontein residents who had not had the benefit of any formal organisation built barricades and prevented the police and army from entering the township. This mass mobilisation established political momentum which almost seemed to have a life of its own, and campaigns like Release Mandela, anti-SAIC, and anti-Republic Day tapped the spontaneous militancy which was simmering just below the surface.

We suddenly found ourselves able to command a huge support base,

large attendances at mass meetings, marches, demonstrations. Our pamphlets, militant speeches and demands were eagerly accepted. We felt we were making great strides in mobilising people politically, but in an euphoria, we made four basic mistakes.

We mistook mass mobilisation for political organisation. Because of the overtly political nature of campaigns like Release Mandela, anti-Republic Day and anti-SAIC, we felt that we were catering for the essential second level of political organisation. First level organisations were able to use these campaigns as reference points to inject some political content into their otherwise reformist activities. But mobilisation is not organisation and we've seen countless times over the last few years how terribly quickly mobilisation can dissipate and die unless it is translated into some organisation, into some on-going activity.

That was our second mistake. We failed to concretise our political gains and advances by using them to build organisation at either the first or the second level.

The third and fourth mistakes have to do with the way we mobilised. I think that the excitement of the campaigns and the enthusiastic support that they received seduced us and drew us away from the tasks of building our first level organisations. Many of our activists and leaders had to neglect their work in the factories and communities and amongst women and students in order to organise and lead campaigns and so instead of complimenting grassroots organisation, these campaigns inevitably detracted from it which is not to say that the activists and leaders involved had any other choice but to take the lead in those campaigns. Precisely because we have not built sufficient political organisation, community, labour and student and women activists had to take responsibility for the campaigns.

The fourth mistake we made was to not take our constituency with us. We were just beginning to consolidate our first level organisations and should have used the mass mobilisation to strengthen our organisation and to raise the awareness of our supporters but too often we raced ahead of them. We telescoped the political process and leapt from specific demands about local issues and grievances to militant demands for the total political capitulation of the current status quo. But we hadn't devised strategies or organisational forms which were capable of taking our grassroots support base with us.

The high levels of mass mobilisation continued until late 1981 and then things began to wind down. Grassroots organisation seemed to reach a ceiling. After a couple of hectic years of activity too, was time to reflect and take stock of the situation, and this internal dynamic combined with a dramatic upsurge in the number of detentions, bannings and other acts of repression, all of which took place against the backdrop of a gathering recession. The progressive movement entered a period of lull, on some fronts, even of retreat, and if we are to emerge from this stronger than before, we are going to have to critically assess the effectiveness with which we have organised, mobilised and educated our people over the last few years.

Starting with organisation, one of the key problems that progressive organisations are running into, is that of sustaining organisation. A lot of our organisations grew rapidly during '80 - '81; interest in them was high and people were eager to participate. Now we are finding that interest and involvement are tailing off and support is far harder to mobilise. So we are going to have to learn to develop new ways to sustaining our organisation, of maintaining the involved. It's no use mobilizing people and then after three or four months starting to think of ways of consolidating their involvement.

Right at the beginning when we're deciding on an issue to organise and mobilise around, we must work out how we are going to get people involved and how we are going to keep them involved. It's no use mobilizing people and then after three or four months starting to think of ways of consolidating their involvement.

The 1980 Soweto rent boycott provides a number of lessons about involving people in organisation and about planning in advance how to consolidate mobilisation into on-going activity. Rent increases in three phases were announced and a mass meeting was held to discuss the issue. About 2 000 people attended the mass meeting and voted to boycott the rent increases. The call to boycott was advertised through the press and endorsed by a number of organisations. The organisation of the boycott mainly took the form of an application to the Supreme Court to prevent the Community Council from collecting the rents on the grounds that the correct procedure had not been followed by the West Rand Administration Board and the Minister of Co-operation and Development.

Now there are a number of points which need to be drawn out here.

The first is that the decision to boycott was taken by 2 000 people at a mass meeting – about 1 percent of the total population of Soweto. Right from the start therefore, Soweto residents had not been properly caucused as to whether they supported a decision to boycott. Secondly, a boycott relies on a high degree of organisation which simply didn't exist in Soweto at that stage, and the manner in which people went about the boycott wasn't one that could build up organisation within. By deciding to wage a legal battle, they took the struggle out of Soweto and into the Supreme Court, out of the hands of the people and into the hands of legal experts. It started out as a grassroots issue which people could identify with, and became a bunch of legal technicalities that no-one could understand.

The only connection between the struggle and the people of Soweto, were the newspaper reports of the court action. And even if people did read those newspaper reports, it is likely that they made as little sense to them as they did to me, because it was a highly technical and legalistic argument. But even if they had been able to decipher the reports, they would have discovered that even if the action succeeded it would only have delayed the increases.

Alas, the issue disappeared as far as resistance was concerned, but remained as far as the increases were concerned. The potential for organising, mobilizing and educating the community – a community with a tradition of militant political activity, simply dissipated.

In this regard we have to look critically at the issue orientation of many of our organisations. Hinging activity around issues raises three problems. The first is that an issue only lasts for a certain space of time. It tends to flare up and then die down again and so if we rely on issues as the basis of our activity we are going to find it, and the involvement of our constituents, fluctuating.

Obviously there will always be issues which we have to take up and these can, and must, be used as springboards for organisation, but we must ensure that we use them to establish on-going programmes of activity which keep people involved and keep the organisation alive.

The second problem with this issue orientation is that many issues are defined in a win/lose way. They're issues which we either win or we lose. The demand advanced by some of the boycotting schools in 1980 for the complete scrapping of Bantu Education provides

an example of this because if the Government didn't scrap Bantu Education, the students would never have been able to return to school without being seen to have "lost". We have to bear in mind that our organised response to these issues is a tactical and not a principled one and as such our demands do not have to be total. One battle is not going to win the war and it is enough that each battle allows us to advance a little in terms of the strength of our organisation and the awareness of our members. In this sense we don't only speak of victory when our demands have been met. Nonetheless, it is important for us to formulate realistic demands, demands which could feasibly be met, and to formulate them in such a way that there is enough middle ground for compromise and even, if necessary, retreat.

The Committee of 81 which co-ordinated the 1980 School Boycotts in the Western Cape, appreciated this and so made short, medium and long term demands and made them in such a way that they could tactically return to school even though their demands had not been fully met.

Another aspect of this win/lose problem is demonstrated by something like squatter removals. We've often seen progressive activists moving into a squatter community which is threatened with eviction and trying to organise and mobilise those people against the evictions. But it's an issue which is almost impossible to win. Those people are going to be moved and their shacks demolished and so we are going to lose. And in losing our organisation may be smashed and even the awareness that we are able to generate amongst those people may be gone within a very short space of time because those people may be dying of starvation in the bantustans.

But of course there will always be issues that we cannot ignore, that we have to take up. And if it is necessary to take up an issue which we cannot win, we must recognise this from the beginning and plan our structures and organising strategy accordingly, so that, even in defeat, we make organisational and ideological gains.

Although it's a helluva hard decision to take, I think that we must become far more strategic about where we organise and which issues we take up. This is a lesson which some of the trade unions have learnt. They started out recruiting any worker that wanted to be organised, but have realised that at a certain point this starts to

overextend their organisational resources, that they cannot effectively represent those workers. So they had to become more strategic about who they organised and where they organised, even if it meant turning workers away and refusing to sign them up.

The third problem flowing out of the issue orientation of some of our organisations is that it pursues them into a reactive style of activity because the issues are often defined by our oppressors. The issue are being forced upon us and we are forced to react, to resist, *but the initiative is not ours. We are not defining what issues we take up, when we take them up and how we take them up.*

We need to plan our own programme of activities for the year, preferably around a common theme, but to do so in a way that still leaves us the flexibility to take up issues as they arise. And if our theme is an appropriate one, those issues which do arise, will more than likely fit into the broad thrust of our activity anyway. The important point to remember though, is that such a programme will mean that we are not dependent on issues for our activity, and that in reacting to those issues we don't neglect our on-going grassroots activity.

In this regard, I think that it's important that we define our organisation around contradictions. In a repressive society like ours, we can identify different sites of struggle – the factories, the communities, the educational system, the oppression of women – and within each site of struggle, there are different issues which we can take up. But rather than defining our organisation according to those issues, we must understand the contradictions at work in that particular site of struggle.

Take the trade union as an example. The reason for the existence of a trade union is the fact that the wealth produced by a lot of people is appropriated by a few and this sets up an antagonistic relationship between workers and bosses. And that antagonism doesn't come and go, it doesn't disappear. It might vary in intensity and form but it's a permanent contradiction, and so the interests of the workers always need to be defended. This means that the trade union always has work to do on behalf of its members. Hence its structure of worker-members electing factory based committees and appointing full time organisers.

Turning to the element of mobilization, I think that we must distinguish between spontaneous or unorganised mobilisation and mobilisation on the basis of organisation. Spontaneous mobilisation is the kind that springs up when people have simply had enough, when the level of oppression and exploitation which people have to bear, reaches an intolerable level and things just break loose. We've seen this happen in the bus boycotts in Natal in late '79, in the boycotts of schools and in wildcat strikes.

Although this spontaneous mobilisation is generally unorganised, organisations are usually drawn in once things are underway and this presents enormous problems because such action is really difficult to channel and consolidate. And since it is usually unplanned there's generally no real strategy behind it and so you're often dealing with ill-advised action which has little hope of succeeding. What's more, spontaneous action tends to be militant and confrontational as well, and often strays outside the bounds of legality.

The result is often that such spontaneous action is ruthlessly suppressed and any established organisation which has responded to the needs of those people and involved itself in their struggle may well be weakened or even smashed in the process.

The same goes for issues like anti-Republic Day which I discussed earlier. In such cases our oppressors force us to take the issue up, even though it may not fit in with our organisational thrust and may contradict the strategies we are pursuing, and despite the fact that we may not have any organisation designed to wage such struggles. In all such cases the art that we are going to have to learn is how to respond to spontaneous mobilisation and spontaneous issues in such a way that we do not abandon our on-going programmatic activities and do not weaken or destroy our organisation in the process and manage to translate some of that mobilisation into organisation.

We know that we are going to be faced with issues which we have no option but to take up, and as the conditions under which the majority of our people's lives get worse, we can expect more and more spontaneous outbursts and so we must develop organisational forms and strategies that will allow us to take up such issues, to channel them constructively and to consolidate whatever gains are made.

I have argued earlier that organisation around particular issues in the spheres of labour, community, women and students is important in itself but must never be seen as an end-in-itself. This is something, however, which has to be realised practically and strategically. It has to be a real commitment. We cannot simply say that we are organising for ultimate political liberation because we might find that we put years and years of organisation and effort into an organisation and then find in fact that we have not advanced the cause of liberation.

We may consolidate an organisation and possibly lighten the burden that people have to bear in their daily lives, but we won't necessarily set in motion the processes of political liberation.

I think that the essential element, the catalyst in that process of liberation is education, and this is ultimately the text that our organisations have to pass. Too often in the last couple of years we've relied on advertising rather than education. We've referred to progressive *symbols in the course of our struggles, we've referred to the Freedom Charter, we've linked our specific demands to broader long-term political demands, but we haven't in fact educated people. We've drawn those links at mass meetings, in statements, in pamphlets and publications, but we haven't made them effectively in terms of the day to day existence of our members.*

At the same time as we ensure that during a boycott or campaign we stress the broader political aspects of our demands, we must ensure that our organisers, in their everyday contact with our supporters draw out the political dimension of people's lives, people's lived experience. Every aspect of their organisation, everything they do, contains within it a lesson about the nature of South African society, a lesson about where we should be going politically, about what a future society would look like.

Organisers must be trained to be able to draw out those lessons in their daily work and contact with members. Involvement and experience in organisation is the key to raising people's awareness but it needs to be drawn out and reflected back to those people so that *they can fully grasp and understand it.*

Let me turn now to an impressionistic survey of the different fronts of progressive activity. The current phase of labour organisation began in the early '70's when student activity around the issue of poverty

wages combined with the spontaneous upsurge of worker militancy in the Durban strikes in 1973 to produce a number of new unions. Nineteen odd unions emerged in the wake of those strikes and the labour movement continued to grow and consolidate during the seventies.

These unions can be divided into General Unions and Industrial Unions. General Unions are open to workers from all sectors of industry be they motor or metal or food or textile workers whereas industrial unions are open only to workers in one specific sector of industry eg. motor workers.

The impetus for the growth of general unions came partly from the fact that workers from many different sectors of industry wanted to join and it seemed to be important to develop a broad worker base which would unite the working class across industrial boundaries.

General unions, however, seem to be moving in the direction of an industrial union style of organisation because they've found it difficult to consolidate their support and strength in any one industry. It doesn't help when you are negotiating with a metal employer to be well-organised in the textile industry. This problem recurs on a national scale as well since a consolidated presence in one industry on a national scale greatly increases your bargaining power with individual employers. And a national presence is becoming necessary in some industries as the spread of monopoly control of industry meant that you are in fact dealing with one employer on a national basis.

In addition, some general unions are finding that their diverse support base does not allow them to organise strategically enough and that there are certain factories and certain sectors of industry in which it is more strategic to organise than others. For example, if one particular employer occupies a very influential position within the private sector then to organise in that employer's factories and to win concessions could have a ripple effect on other employers (and workers) in that industry.

There's been another interesting shift in the nature of trade union organisation over the last couple of years. In the '70's managements generally refused to acknowledge the existence of trade unions. They were reluctant to concede the right of workers to be represented by

a trade union and so a lot of the struggle between management and labour was over the recognition by management of unions. And after the Wiehahn Commission proposals resulted in a provision for government registration of unions, the Government appealed to management not to deal with or recognise unions who had not registered under the government's provisions.

But they could not stem the tide of history. Independent black trade unions continued to grow and as they came to represent a majority of the workforce managements were forced to break with the government and deal with them registered or unregistered. I think that the growth of labour organisation on the east coast during 1980 in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London and Durban, spearheaded by unions who rejected the government's registration provisions, was crucial in splitting management off from the government's strategy and decisively tipping the scales in favour of management recognition of black trade unions.

This is not to suggest of course that managements are falling over themselves to recognise black trade unions, but I do feel that the frontline has shifted from struggles over recognition to struggles over co-option and control. Management's advanced guard — the monopoly corporations, industrial relations specialists, some academics and journalists — have accepted that black trade unions are here to stay but are determined to define the rules of the game in such a way as to neutralize as far as possible any challenge to their domination in the workplace.

Now the growing acceptance by management of the inevitability (and possibly even the necessity) of black trade unions and their attempts to co-opt unions coincides with an interesting dynamic within and most of the black unions, namely an incredible growth in membership over the last few years which has stretched their organisational resources to the point where unions can not hope to consolidate the large numbers of new members into solid factory structures. The Metal and Allied Workers Union, for example, virtually doubled in size in 1981, going from 15 000 or 18 000 members to around 35 000.

And so we have a situation developing where union organisers who have been swamped by the growth in membership and cannot effectively consolidate their factory organisation are being offered recogni-

tion by management. Having signed up a significant proportion of the workforce, they find themselves invited by management, to negotiations and presented with long and complex recognition agreements drafted by industrial relations specialists.

This shifts the site of struggle from the factory floor to the board room and offers the Union an established working relationship with management, but according to management's ground rules as enshrined in their legalistic recognition agreement with all its clauses and sub-clauses and qualifications and so on. And so I predict that more and more unions are going to find themselves in a Catch 22 situation where the offer of recognition on management's terms is going to be irresistible because they in fact do not have the organisational resources to effectively mobilise their membership, to raise their consciousness to confront management and wage a battle against them.

However, management's desire to co-opt unions does not mean that they are taking a softer line in dealing with organised labour. On the contrary. The success of their strategy depends on them being able to force unions to accept an institutionalised form of collective bargaining. One of the issues over which this battle is being currently fought is that of participation by independent black unions in Industrial Councils.

Industrial Councils are statutory bodies where management and labour meet to set minimum conditions for an industry. Now many unions believe that negotiations should take place within the factory between workers and their individual management.

They feel that the Councils are dominated by management and tame white unions and that their bargaining power in such a forum would be diluted. And anyway they want to preserve the direct involvement of workers in negotiations at a factory level.

So participation in Industrial Councils is being seen by many unions as the threshold of co-option which they don't want to cross. That crossing it would involve them in a bureaucratised, institutionalised system of industrial relations which has less potential for organising, mobilising and educating the workers.

Managements have predictably taken a really hard line over the question of participation in Industrial Councils and have refused

to negotiate with unions outside of the councils and so this has become one of the most contentious points in labour relations over the last two years.

For example, there were 44 reported strikes in the metal industry on the East Rand in the first six months of 1982. 30 of these concerned wage demands. Most employers refused to hold discussions with workers outside of the industrial council, while the Metal and Allied Workers Union which was involved in 33 of the 44 strikes rejected the Industrial Council and insisted on plant level bargaining. The Industrial Council system was thus the underlying issue since many of these strikes would not have occurred had management not refused to bargain with workers outside of the Industrial Council.

Wages have continued to be the major cause of strikes. Of the 111 strikes in the final six months of 1982, 63 were over wages. A new issue has exploded on the labour scene, however, and that is retrenchments. FOSATU Unions, for example, didn't have one strike over retrenchments in 1981, and yet this year they've had 16. Managements have been taking a particularly hard line against demands for living wages and retrenchment and as the economy moves into a recession, I think that disputes over both issues will escalate. Managements are likely to try and maintain high profit margins by keeping wages as low as possible while at the same time retrenching workers in this way for further cutting their wage bill and forcing the reduced workforce to work even harder and so boosting productivity.

A major new development in the pattern of strike activity was that of the rolling strike. This is a strike which breaks out in one factory but then quickly spreads through the area. The East Rand saw two rolling strikes in the metal industry. The first wave struck in February/March and totalled 20 strikes before it washed over, and the second wave, in late April/early May came seven strikes. Northern Natal was also hit by rolling strikes and at one stage an entire township stayed away from work in support of worker demands. These rolling strikes seem to represent a high degree of class consciousness amongst workers which is leading them to adopt a more assertive, more militant approach.

Unemployment is likely to increase dramatically this coming year and is going to be one of the critical issues facing all progressive organisations. Unions will find themselves fighting against retrench-

ments while community-based organisations, including student, youth and women's groups are going to have to cope with the rising numbers of unemployed. On a slightly more positive note, I also think that unemployment could be an issue around which community, trade union, youth, student and women's organisations could co-operate in developing a co-ordinated strategy. Hopefully, united action of this sort would help to improve and consolidate the working relationship between the different spheres of progressive activity.

The relationship between trade unions and community groups has been uneven to say the least. We can trace the history of the relationship back to 1979 when Fattis and Monis workers, having gone on strike, saw that they could increase their bargaining power if people in communities stopped buying Fattis and Monis products. If Fattis and Monis sales dropped and the company began to feel the pinch they might become a lot more amenable to negotiating with the workers. But the African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU) which represented the striking workers played no direct role in organising the boycott and this led to the absurd situation where the AFCWU reached an agreement with the Fattis and Monis management and wanted to call off the boycott but one of the organisations which had been organising the boycott refused because they disagreed with the agreement.

The meat strike in mid-1980 saw the pendulum swing back to the opposite extreme. The General Workers' Union which represented the striking workers insisted on being directly in control of the boycott. Members of GWU chaired the boycott committee and meetings were held at the GWU offices. This was also not a satisfactory arrangement, however, and so we still do not have a precedent which encapsulates the correct balance between the two constituencies — total control of the one by the other or total autonomy of the one from the other.

On the level of support activity then, we have the problem of establishing the equality of the different progressive organisations so that they can lend support to each other without dominating or being dominated. This problem, however, manifests itself at the level of united or joint action. United fronts between trade union, community, student and women's groups are obviously essential on issues such as anti-Republic Day, anti-SAIC and Release Mandela. The people involved in the community and trade union organisations representing the

working class need to come together in a broad front to plan together and organise together.

GWU have recently put forward three points which they feel should guide any such relationship. Firstly, they stress that they are primarily a workers organisation concerned with factory organisation and factory issues. Secondly, their democratic structure makes it necessary for them to first seek a mandate from their members before participating in broader struggles. Thirdly, they affirm their commitment to a national democratic struggle. And I feel that this is the crucial point to bear in mind about any alliance of trade union, community, student and women's organisations. Certainly any such alliance must take into account the independence of each organisation, the fact that they have different support bases, that they are democratic and have to take the interests of their members into account when allying with each other, but the crucial overriding factor is that all these progressive organisations are part of a national democratic struggle. Not one of them is the national democratic struggle.

Unfortunately, we do have problems with organisations seeing themselves as the struggle, or as its leading component, rather than as just a part of the national democratic struggle. The national democratic struggle is a different level altogether. It is not a trade union. It is not a student or community or women's group. It is the explicitly political organisation, mobilisation and education of people.

None of the first level progressive organisations is a political organisation. They take up issues as they affect a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular point in time. And although these first-level issues are ultimately political, and although these first level organisations can and must draw out that political content, they are not waging a political struggle for the political rights of all people. And where first level organisations do try to take on explicitly political roles, they fall between two stools. They become ineffective first level organisations because they devote less of their energies and resources to building and consolidating first level organisation and they are inadequate second level organisations because they have neither the structure nor the mandate and support base to act as political organisations.

Now this is a delicate balance that the first level organisations have to strike — concentrating on immediate constituency issues while

at the same time drawing out its political content so as to contribute to an overall national democratic struggle. Too many groups lose that balance. We've seen, for example, trade unions maintain that they want nothing to do with political mobilisation. We've seen some student groups concentrate almost exclusively on political mobilisation and not give enough attention to local student issues.

As I stressed earlier in my talk, our first level of organisation has to be on a constituency basis. People are brought together in the schools and universities, in the communities and in the factories. In each of these spheres people have the same problems, making it possible to organise them and mobilise them around those issues. But we cannot leave people locked into one compartment of organisation. We cannot statistically define them as students, women or as members of one community or one factory. We cannot limit their involvement to one organisation and one set of issues.

Their experience and their awareness has to be one which goes beyond the confines of any one sphere of organisation for the simple reason that no one sphere is capable of liberating our people. First level organisation must move people beyond the limited problems and solutions of student, women, factory and community organisations and instil in their members an awareness of, and a commitment to, national political liberation.

So we have to start breaking down those compartments between our organisations as we organise, as we mobilise, and as we educate. ~~If we've got to transcend these first level organisations without destroying or neglecting them,~~ the obvious way to do that is to build a degree of co-ordination between the different first level organisations. This will immediately allow us to straddle those organisational boundaries so that instead of community organisations fighting on one front and trade unions on another, we could start to bring those fronts together and advance as a progressive movement.

But this would still be a progressive movement at the first level. The organisations, linking up on an issue like, for example, unemployment, are still going to be doing so at the first level. They are not political organisations and they haven't built a political movement yet. Their structures, their issues, their mandates, their membership are all still growing out of those first level issues, and it is essential that these organisations continue to organise, mobilise and educate people at that level.

These first level organisations form one half of the process of liberation; but liberation is more than just the sum total of all their activities and a national democratic struggle is more than just the co-ordinated struggles of first level organisations.

So our first problem is how we are going to start to co-ordinate and unite our progressive organisations? But secondly, having done that, how are we then going to build a progressive national democratic movement? What structures will it have? What issues will it take up? How will it mobilise? These are all questions which we need to confront because otherwise we are going to build a foundation which can't support the structures that we want to erect.

Let me turn to the realm of student and youth organisations. The student movement has a proud history. Despite its limitations it has played a key role at crucial phases in South African history. In 1956 NUSAS led the campaign against the segregation of the universities and militant campus activity was in many senses given its definition by these campaigns in the '50's. In the early '70's student involvement in labour played a major part in launching the current wave of trade union organisation. The nationwide uprisings of '76 and '77 were student-led, and in the late '70's the student movement played a major role in the remoulding of a national, non-racial democratic movement. Student organisations have been central in articulating a non-racial, democratic position and in fact, the current popularity and wide acceptance of the Freedom Charter is not entirely undue to the emphasis that the student movement has laid on the democratic principles enshrined in the Charter.

However, I can't help feeling that the student movement has not lived up to its full potential in recent years. One of the tasks facing NUSAS, COSAS and AZASO at these congresses and council meetings is to devise strategies and programmes for the coming year which will encapsulate their potential role at this point in our struggle. Let me expand on this point a bit.

The contribution of the student movement to the struggle has to be on the basis of its student activity. The same goes for the unions, community and women's groups. All of these must be working amongst their constituents in such a way that they cater for their immediate interests and contribute to the national democratic strug-

gle at the same time. If there is not a direct link between these two components of progressive activity, organisations may participate in broader national democratic struggles without the support of their members, and at the same time will not be feeding the political content of those national democratic struggles back into their first level organisations.

If there is a dichotomy between our programmes and activities inside the schools and universities and the broader political issues and struggles which we are taking up outside the schools and universities, then we are going to lose the pulse of history. Both sets of activities are likely to become less relevant, less appropriate to the situation that students and the progressive movement as a whole, find themselves in. And both sets of activity are important.

Organisations within the schools and universities allows the student movement to consolidate its support base, to raise the awareness of students, to force the educational system to play a more meaningful role in South African society. It allows them to expose and exploit the contradictions of South African society, to disorganise the ruling classes.

But developing an internal support base is only half of the task facing the student movement. That student support base has to be mobilised to play a constructive role on a much broader scale – to contribute to the development of the struggle as a whole. But there has to be a link between the two. You can't organise students around one set of issues and then take up a different set of issues which concern a struggle outside the education system because if you do you'll find yourself addressing two different audiences, a student audience on the one hand and a trade union/community audience on the other. You have to somehow marry the two, weld them together. They have to feed into each other.

The issues and demands and campaigns which are being mobilised around in the schools and universities have to lead logically, axiomatically into the consideration of broader social issues. So that if you are taking up a factory or community struggle the reason for you taking it up has to somehow flow out of the type of demands and issues that you have been raising within your schools and universities. And at the same time the political content of those broader issues must be fed back into your local structures in such a way that it raises

the awareness of your members and helps to strengthen your local organisation. There has to be a reciprocal, a dialectical relationship between the two.

To take the NUSAS theme of Campus Action for Democracy as an example – it had the potential of mobilising students around issues which they thought were important, but which were not limited to students, which raised broader issues about the nature of our society. But somehow the link was not adequately made. That theme has not provided a framework within which on and off campus issues can be dealt with, a framework which would make it logical and necessary for students to be concerned and involved with both on and off campus issues.

Let me give you an example. I attended a meeting at Wits a few years ago on the Wilson-Rowntree boycott. Two unionists spoke. They gave good speeches and it was a very rousing and important meeting. But when I looked at the audience of about 400 I saw that very few of them were students, and those who were represented your more involved actionists and organisers. I felt that the issue, the Wilson-Rowntree boycott, had not arisen out of the mainstream of student activity on campus and the mobilisation being created by that meeting was not being converted into ongoing organisation on the campus.

Let's look at some of the other reasons why I regard the student movement as so important. Firstly it acts as a recruiting and training ground for activists. If we look at struggles in South Africa and world-wide we see that many leading activists received their initial politicization and organisational training in the student movement.

The second reason is that people involved in student organisations are all involved in the education process; in thinking, analysing, questioning. This means often that they are developing a higher level of knowledge and awareness than the rest of society. Students see things that the rest of society doesn't see. They develop a progressive analysis to a greater extent than other organisations. I think that a lot of the progressive analysis that the trade unions and community organisations have assimilated actually originated in the student movement and I cannot overstress the importance of the student movement as the melting pot for that progressive analysis, as the generator of that progressive analysis.

At the moment there is a drastic shortage of progressive analysis of our struggle, analysis that would help organisations develop more relevant and effective strategies and which would in turn enable the people in those organisations to understand the oppressive conditions under which they live and work.

Another facet of this process, and again one which the student movement is particularly well placed to cater for, is information. The saying that "information is power" has become a cliché and we need to give it a concrete political role. Information in our society is monopolised and controlled and only fed to us in selected doses to limit what we know and consequently what we think. The student movement has the intellectual and material resources to be able to make information and knowledge available to other progressive organisations.

We can also plug in a lot of other organisational resources. Relatively speaking the student movement is highly organised. It has a lot of facilities and resources at its disposal, anything from printing equipment right through to the ability to organise a seminar or a conference.

Thirdly, I think that the student movement can play an important role in campaigns. Anti-Republic Day, the Wilson-Rowntree and red mean boycotts, anti-SAIC and Release Mandela are all campaigns in which students played an important part. And I think that the contribution of students to such campaigns is particularly important because the student movement is, to a greater extent than other progressive organisations, organised on a national scale. I don't think that any other constituency of progressive activity can mobilise and initiate activity on a national scale as effectively as the student movement can.

The nationwide stoppage by some 70 000 workers in protest at the death in detention of trade unionist Dr Neil Aggett is an example of the potential power of the labour movement and a highly significant example in its own right but I think that it represents at this stage at least, something of a special case and doesn't affect my argument about the role of students in "political" campaigns.

In addition, student organisations have a more highly politicised

support base. Obviously, I don't want to exaggerate the political awareness of students, but let's face it, the way students take up issues, the discussions and debates that go with issues, are more explicitly political than in other branches of the progressive movement. This is partly due to the greater freedom that sometimes prevails in the schools and universities, but it's also got something to do with youth, the fact that youth question, youth have energy, youth are rebellious. This often means that students can develop an issue into an explicitly political one far more quickly and sometimes more thoroughly than other groups can.

On a more sober note though, I think that we still have a long way to go in consolidating student organisation. The student movement has at times also fallen into the trap of mistaking a high degree of mobilisation for organisation and radical rhetoric for political education. This has sometimes resulted in a neglect of basic student issues and organisation. It is essential that local structures be built which can initiate programmes to take up those basic student issues on an on-going basis so that students always have organised activities in which they can involve themselves and which are doing something for them, helping them deal with day-to-day problems.

I think that youth organisation in the communities is going to grow and become an increasingly important focus of activity. Youth have often provided much of the people power for community based organisation but have only recently started to concentrate on building their own organisational structures and activities. An interesting example in this regard is the rapid growth of the Lenz Youth League. Lenz is an Indian community near Johannesburg which after the 1980 school boycott had four SRC's established itself and is in the process of organising a week-long youth festival. Obviously the raised awareness and organisational energy resulting from the boycotts has been channelled into youth rather than school organisation.

I mentioned earlier that a new approach to organisation, mobilisation and education emerged after 1977 – an approach which emphasised grassroots, democratic organisations around issues which directly affected people. This "new wave" has been most noticeable in the sphere of community organisation. Taking up issues like housing, high rents, bus fares, township conditions, health and child care to name only some of the more common areas of activity these organisa-

tions have established themselves in their communities and have developed local leadership and organisational structures which will play an increasingly important role in the progressive movement over the next couple of years.

Community groups have developed an exceptionally democratic method of organising by using a system of house meetings and street representatives. A house meeting is essentially a discussion between an organiser and members of one or more households over particular issues that concern them. As such, it ensures the direct participation of residents in defining issues and deciding on courses of action. This door-to-door mobilisation usually leads up to the election of an action committee and eventually the formation of a civic or Residents Association.

In taking up issues community organisations have been concerned to link up their immediate local demands to broader demands of the oppressed majority. The point that has come out every time is that problems experienced at a local level in the community can be traced back to the lack of political rights and representation experienced by the members of that community. Because people do not have the role or because no effective or meaningful local government structures exist, people have no say in decision-making processes. And because they don't elect those who do make decisions, they don't act in the people's interests.

The same problem is mirrored at a national political level – the people don't have the right to elect the government and it consequently does not represent their interests. The ultimate long-term solution to local community problems then lies in the achievement of majority rule in a unitary state.

Certain overall demands, certain rights, have also been stressed, such as "housing for all" and "rents which people can afford". This is very important in terms of what I was saying earlier about the importance of drawing out the political content and potential of local grassroots issues, and in terms of defining issues in such a way that they provide a basis for on-going programmes of action. So that rather than just taking up a local community issue which is fought and won or lost and then disappears, we take it up in a way that ensures that the issue endures in terms of both organisation and awareness.

The Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation, PEBCO, for example, made clear that while it was a civic organisation concerned with local community problems, all the issues it was taking up were at the same time political in that they were part and parcel of the exploitative and oppressive system people are living under. PEBCO also stressed that it was not a political organisation, and that although the long-term solution to civic problems was a political one, that a national political movement, and not a local civic one, was needed to wage those political struggles.

Community organisations have provided a means through which people can get involved, where they can develop confidence in their own organisation and power, where they can learn the skills of organisation and democracy and, through the experience of struggle, come to understand their situation in an oppressive society. They have developed a progressive, community based leadership and have started to reach out to other local organisations to form regional umbrella structures.

This is a particularly interesting and important development in that it may be the first step in overcoming the limitations of isolated, individual struggles. The umbrella structures can establish a degree of unity and co-ordination which greatly extends the potential of issues taken up by the individual affiliates. The next step will be to try and overcome the uneven growth of community organisation. All over the country we find cities with a high degree of organisation in some communities and almost none in neighbouring communities. Overcoming this unevenness I would see as a priority for community organisations over the next 18 months.

At the same time, community organisations, and in particular their umbrella bodies, need to develop their working relationships with other spheres of progressive activity. By this I mean linking up with similar groups locally and nationally, and with other spheres of organisation like trade unions, student and women's groups.

One final point on the question of the structure of community organisation. I discussed the problem of sustaining organisation, and particularly by the involvement of the members or supporters, and I gave the example of the trade union which has a membership that it has to constantly defend against the bosses. This obviously makes it easier

for the union to maintain the involvement of its members. Now this problem is far greater in the communities. People are concentrated in a factory and can be more easily assembled for a meeting to discuss issues and problems, to hear report-backs and to take decisions. Meetings take place during working hours, the bosses time. In the communities, people are relatively dispersed and meetings take place in their homes during their precious leisure time.

Community organisations have been relatively successful in overcoming these problems but I can't help feeling that if they are to become more effective, if they are to develop from here, that they are going to have to explore new and different organisational forms and structures. Membership, elections, full-time organisers, local offices are just some of the options which spring to mind, and I'm sure that the appropriate ones will emerge in time from the concrete organisational experience of these groups.