



APDUSA VIEWS

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**A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS
OF THE
CRITICISM
OF
CONSUMER
BOYCOTTS**

INTRODUCTION

An oppressed people never let up in their opposition against a system which oppresses them. From the very inception of oppression, people conduct struggles against it. In the course of the history of a liberatory movement, these struggles assume many forms. Often the methods of struggle are ineffective and even counter-productive. Here we have in mind opposition by way of complaints couched in petitions, memoranda and deputations, prayers conducted to change the heart of the oppressor or to invoke divine wrath on the oppressor, Gandhian passive resistance and the like. Other methods have been shown to be more effective – policy of non-collaboration, boycotts, strikes, demonstrations and in cases where civil liberties are denied to the people, the armed struggle.

One of the most important functions of a political leadership is to select the most effective methods of struggle, having regard to time, conditions and place. To ignore these factors and to transplant forms of struggle applied in foreign lands in the South African soil amounts to criminal dereliction of duty on the part of that leadership.

STRUGGLES CHARACTERIZE A PERIOD

Often a period in the history of the liberatory movement is characterized by a particular form of struggle which eclipses all other forms.

The pre-1910 period of the South African history was dominated by the military struggle. From 1910 up till 1943 petition politics was the order of the day. From 1943 until 1950 the boycott as a weapon of struggle and non-collaboration caught the imagination of the oppressed people and spread like wild fire.

During the succeeding decade there was a mixture of the ethos of the 1940s and a rash of publicity stunts, reckless adventures and pressure politics to compel the ruling class to a round table conference. The 1960s was marked by a realisation by certain organisations that non-violence had failed abjectly and the armed struggle was top on the list of priorities.

The era ushered in by the Soweto Revolt in 1976 brought with it new methods of struggle – prolonged school boycotts, physical confrontation between the youth and the armed forces of the ruling class, large scale destruction of government buildings, the killing of collaborators and policemen, strikes (industrial and general) and consumer boycotts.

This period also witnessed the adoption of the policy of non-collaboration by the ENTIRE liberatory movement.

CONSUMER BOYCOTTS

A meaningful analysis of Consumer Boycotts as a method of struggle must be preceded by an acceptance of the fact that there is more than one type of Consumer Boycott. The boycotts differ in respect of goals or objectives.

The consumer boycotts of the 1950s were aimed at firms which were owned by Nationalist Party members and supporters. The goal of those boycotts was summed up by the slogan: "The Nats must go!" Thus by implication, and sometimes very explicitly, the demand that the United Party must be voted into power. Such boycotts were correctly criticised by the Unity Movement on the grounds that the discredited doctrine, of the United Party being less evil than the Nationalist Party, was being presented.

A new form of Consumer Boycott was evolved in the late 1970s and 1980s with the rise of the Black Trade Union Movement. Here the target was an individual firm which refused to accord its workers basic Trade Union rights or engaged in unfair labour practice. The goal of this type of boycott was to apply pressure on the recalcitrant firm to accept the demands of the workers. This was sought to be done by appealing to the oppressed Community at large to boycott the firm i.e., to refuse to patronise it or buy from it. The Community was asked to show **SOLIDARITY** with the workers involved in the dispute.

The immediate outcome of these consumer boycotts was mixed – some of the boycotts achieved the stated objective, whilst others failed. In another sense, however, each of these boycotts was a success. They taught people the meaning of **SOLIDARITY** i.e., to rise to the defence of others. When people learn to make sacrifices in matters which do not concern them **DIRECTLY**, then there is clearly a qualitative leap forward in their consciousness.

1985 witnessed a new type of Consumer Boycott. It grew out of the grim conditions in the townships of the Eastern Cape. These townships were invaded by units of the South African Defence Force. Atrocities, the chief contribution by an uninvited occupying army, became a daily feature of township life. It was in response to the presence and activities of the Army which gave birth to this type of Consumer Boycott. The goal was to have the army removed from the townships. The plan was to boycott the White-owned shops and thereby to attack the pockets of the owners. The organised bodies of these shop owners, i.e. the Chambers of Commerce, were expected to apply pressure on the official ruling class to have the army removed and thereby to put an end to loss of trade and profit.

When, later, the State of Emergency was declared, the affected townships added the lifting of the State of Emergency as one of the demands and goals.

The success of the 1985 Consumer Boycotts in the Eastern Cape was exploited by opportunists who claimed that by means of Consumer Boycotts people would achieve liberation. Unfortunately liberation is not given to such simple solutions. The proposition is so ludicrous that it need not detain us.

We have indicated the different types of Consumer Boycotts and it is for the political organisations to decide which of the boycotts they wish to support. It would be the height of folly to regard all the boycotts as the same and to dump them in one basket.

CONSUMER BOYCOTT AS A POLITICAL WEAPON

As stated above, the Consumer Boycott as a political weapon was forged during a struggle which the people regarded as a matter of life and death in the literal sense. In a very short space of time, the people adopted the Consumer Boycott as their own. It became a people's weapon of struggle.

From a report of the SUNDAY TIMES of 11 August 1985 we learn the following:—

- 1. The proposed boycott was to embrace some 4 million people.**
- 2. More than 600 000 people were engaged in the boycott in Port Elizabeth and East London.**
- 3. According to Frank Wightman, the President of the Port Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce, the boycott in its third week was a 100% success.**
- 4. The boycott spread to Springs, Klerksdorp, Orkney, Stilfontein, Carltonville, Witbank, other Reef areas and Pietermaritzburg. (Later to Pinetown and Mooi River).**
- 5. Organisers of the Boycott were Community organisations and Trade Unions.**

A people who have been denied the franchise and, therefore, political power, lie at the mercy of those who have the monopoly of political power. That power is invariably employed for the benefit of those who have the franchise and at the expense of the franchiseless. The oppression of the latter takes the form of draconian laws, harsh reprisals against opponents by way of imprisonment, persecution, torture, brutality and massacres.

The question is: What are the people to do?

Either the people succumb to the inhuman onslaught of violence and live in the "peace of the graveyard". Or they fight back as best they can and thereby keep burning the precious flame of resistance. Struggle is always creative and throws up all sorts of political weapons. Often those weapons are crude and rough but nonetheless effective. It is the task of the leadership to give direction and purpose to the spontaneous reactions of the people. It is also the task of the leadership to analyse, process and refine the people's weapons and give it back to them.

Viewed from this perspective, the Consumer Boycott evolved in the Eastern Cape is an act of resistance, a declaration that notwithstanding the unprecedented violence unleashed on them, the people will not take it lying down.

As a weapon the Consumer Boycott is far from perfect. (As a matter of fact, there are no perfect weapons). Yet it is necessary that the fighting morale of the people must be sustained and their militancy must not be allowed to wane. In the absence of an alternative, the Consumer Boycott is performing both those functions.

CRITICS OF THE CONSUMER BOYCOTT

The Consumer Boycott has been condemned by the entire ruling class – official and unofficial. Its ranks have been minutely swelled by a group of persons who regard themselves as left and whom we describe as “ultra-leftists”.

We now deal with some of the salient points raised in criticism of the Consumer Boycott.

- 1. “It is futile to fight against single aspects of oppression; . . . energy of the masses must be directed at uprooting the very system itself”**

We are being told that we should not fight against acts of oppression; that the campaigns waged against the deprivation of the franchise by Hertzog in 1936, the Coloured Advisory Council, rehabilitation scheme, Bantu-ised Schooling, Bantu Authorities, the Bantustans, mass removals, the rape of civil liberties, ruling class brutality, etc are all futile. We should rather look the other way when these acts of oppression take place. We are to tell the people not to bother with these single acts of oppression; to accept these acts as temporary measures and that they should direct their energies to the uprooting of the entire system!

It is clear that persons who believe in this approach have not worked amongst the oppressed people. Those of us who have, know that this approach is totally divorced from reality. Where people are confronted with a specific act of oppression or exploitation, this approach will fall on deaf ears. It is like the missionary approach of a promise of heaven if you endure earthly suffering. It is not heaven in the never never future that people need, but direction and guidance as to how to resist a particular act of oppression.

Elementary knowledge of the struggle teaches us that it is ONLY by engaging in the day to day struggles of the people that we get known to them and win their confidence. In fighting against specific acts of oppression side by side with the people and not as “generals”, we will be able to drive home the valuable lesson that specific acts of oppression flow from a system of oppression which has to be destroyed. For people to be receptive to the idea of linking the specific act of oppression with oppression in general, we must first have won their confidence. And there is no better way of winning their confidence than by fighting side by side with them against specific matters which affect them.

It is in day to day struggles that people are rallied to resistance; their consciousness heightens; organisational structures are set up and valuable experience in field work, political education and organisation is gained. Without this kind of experience, it would be impossible to wage a far more fundamental struggle on a national scale.

Of course the "ultra-leftists" who give a wide berth to the path of "issue politics" by adopting a "more-revolutionary-than-thou" attitude, conveniently find themselves relieved of the onerous but necessary tasks involved in conducting day-to-day struggles. But without such struggles it will not be possible to build a mass based organisation. It is for this reason that "ultra-leftists" are forever condemned to function in tiny little groups.

"The Consumer Boycott benefits only the black petty bourgeois shop-keepers," who are damned as reactionaries.

The Unity Movement, since its inception, advocated a united front of workers, peasants, intellectuals and the radical section of the petty bourgeoisie, i.e. all classes which have an interest in the liquidation of national oppression and the attainment of the Ten Point Programme.

The classical writers, masters in the field of conducting struggles, while emphasizing the vacillating nature of the petty bourgeoisie, (swinging from the extreme of impulsiveness to faintheartedness) nonetheless, considered the winning over of the petty bourgeoisie as an absolute prerequisite for a successful struggle.

Members of the Unity Movement need no lessons from any quarter about the nature of the petty bourgeoisie. Our philosophy is rooted in the paramountcy of interests of the workers and peasants and there is little chance for petty bourgeoisie interests gaining priority over those of the workers and peasants.

To say that the Consumer Boycott was launched in order to benefit the shopkeepers is an untrue and an ill-considered statement. The benefits received by the Black shopkeepers is no more than an incidental consequence, a spin-off. The matter in any event, is more complex than simply the shopkeepers increasing their profits. Otherwise the INYANDA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE of Durban and the Greater Soweto Chamber of Commerce, both being associations of African shopkeepers, would NOT have publicly come out against the Consumer Boycott.

An objection to Black shopkeepers making additional profits means that the ultra-leftists would rather the giant chain stores made the profits and by so doing earn the gratitude of the Ackermans!

3. "The Consumer Boycott shall fail."

The failure or success of the boycott surely depends on its objectives, both stated and unstated. If the objective was to topple the government, then obviously it must fail. One does not have to be a political pundit to make that prediction.

The Unity Movement and its affiliates which have participated in Consumer Boycotts have laid down far less ambitious and more realistic objectives. In some areas, Consumer Boycotts were launched to resolve trade union disputes in favour of the workers. Elsewhere involvement in boycotts meant meaningful intervention to give direction and content to boycotts which were launched on a vague and ill-defined basis.

The standpoint of the Unity Movement is clear. It does not advocate indefinite boycotts nor does it lay down unattainable objectives. In such circumstances there can be no question of failure of the boycott.

POSITION OF ULTRA-LEFTISTS

It requires little effort from intellectuals who are far removed from the daily battles raging between oppressor and oppressed to work out tidy little arguments belittling the Consumer Boycotts and branding them as reactionary.

Arguments worked out in ivory towers can be made to sound quite logical. But logic divorced from reality can lead to grotesque positions.

The forces involved with the consumer boycott have grouped themselves into two opposing camps. On the one hand there is the broad liberatory movement. On the other there is the ruling class. The latter consists of the official ruling class, the Chambers of Industry and Commerce, the State machinery and reactionary Black organisations like INYANDA, an affiliate of Inkatha.

Boycott activists have been harrassed, threatened with violence and arrested. This is so because the ruling class recognises the political nature of the boycott. The stooges vie with their Master in opposing the boycott.

Here is an example:

"The INYANDA Chamber of Commerce has declared war on FOSATU and called on KwaZulu citizens to co-operate in crushing the consumer boycott in Pietermaritzburg by 28 September (The Natal Daily News – 25/09/85)

Another example comes from R Nowbath, a columnist of "The Leader" who gained notoriety by joining the President's Council, being recommended by Rajbansi. Nowbath makes racist attacks on FOSATU officials, Alec Erwin and John Copelyn:

"I should like to know what deprivations and sufferings white Pink-ous endure when they call for . . . consumer boycotts . . .

These Pink-ous come from nicely loaded homes in plush white Group Areas where they have all the comforts of white South Africa ("The Leader – 27/9/85)

Thus the ultra-leftists, having shifted so far to the left that they now find themselves with strange bedfellows whom they would not touch with a fourteen foot barge pole – in theory and logic. But then, logic is one thing and reality quite something else.

Objectively viewed, a public attack on consumer boycotts in general must of necessity assist the reactionary forces. And that is precisely how the people will view the attack. No amount of clever "logic" is going to save the ultra-leftists from the anger of the people. Those who criticise the consumer boycott while the two opposing camps are in the midst of battle will be branded as hirelings of the ruling class and the giant chain stores and as allies of rabid groups like Inyanda.

CONCLUSION

We are functioning as politicians in extraordinary times. The people are defending themselves with their backs against the wall. In these times we must intervene and make our mark. Text books are of little use. We must tax our ingenuity and experience to leave our imprint in this struggle. We must not be queasy about weapons of struggle. Provided a weapon of struggle does not violate our principles and policy and provided further that that method does not retard the struggle, there is no reasons why it should not be adopted.

ONLY IN STRUGGLE IS THERE LIFE!

THEREFORE, THE STRUGGLE MUST CONTINUE!