
convention alliance

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Two years and one month after its inception, the UDF finds itself bearing the full brunt of the government's onslaught. Two thirds of our national and regional executive members are out of action through death, detention or trial. At least two thousand rank and file members of UDF affiliates are in detention. A major UDF affiliate, COSAS, has just been banned.

It comes as no surprise that we should bear the weight of the government's onslaught. It is, of course, a back-handed compliment. The wave of repression, as many foreign and local journalists have noted, has merely served to boost the status of the UDF. However, we have not invited this repression for its own sake; it is the consequence of the effective challenge we have mounted to the government's "reforms".

Indeed, the "reforms" and repression are not in contradiction to each other. Both are intended to give a crisis-ridden regime time and space to perpetuate itself. Above all, both the "reforms" and the repression are designed to shut out mass-based, democratic participation in the transformation of our country.

The same excluding intentions lie, unfortunately, behind the many recipes for hope and dialogue that are now flourishing. The political bankruptcy of the government, coupled with the onslaught on the UDF, have prompted a rush for the limelight in certain quarters. Each day brings a new recipe: Anton Rupert ("a man of vision is needed..."), Raymond Ackerman ("an alchemy of great vision is needed..."), Buthelezi (every night on SATV).

Since the mid-70's when he was still offering Lebanon as an outstanding example of an effective, multi-ethnic "constitutional" system, Van Zyl Slabbert has advocated a particular brand of "negotiation" politics. Specifically, he has sought closed-door talks between representative political elites (his term, not ours). It is this vision of politics, we believe, that underlines the national convention alliance. We see in this initiative another attempt to keep the broad mass of South Africans off the political stage.

The UDF insists that there can be no meaningful change in South Africa, and consequently no peace, without the unbanning of all political organisations, the unconditional release of all detainees and political prisoners, the scrapping of the racist constitution, the pass laws, group areas and bantustans.

All restrictions on workers' ability to organise themselves in trade unions must also be removed. These are not bargaining chips. They are the objective conditions necessary for developing a meaningful democratic participation and mass acceptance of any change.

When the UDF calls for the release of Nelson Mandela, it is not so that he can be whisked off to top-level negotiations behind closed doors (assuming that someone of Mandela's calibre and integrity would allow this to happen, in the first place). We demand that Mandela and all other political prisoners

be allowed to take up their rightful role in the development of mass-based organisation.

It is meaningless to push for national conventions at a time like the present. We assert this not out of any knee-jerk intransigence. The lesson of the last two years is, precisely, that you cannot negotiate "reforms" over the heads of the people. Without remedying the exclusion of the majority from democratic involvement, you will simply fuel the violence and bloodshed.

Where does this leave us, then? We in the UDF, no less than most South Africans, greatly look forward to the day when South Africa can live in peace with itself and the world. While there are no shortcuts, we are not pessimistic about the future.

We are greatly heartened by the growing participation of millions of South Africans in the running of their own lives. In a great many initiatives - local and national, rural and urban - we are seeing ordinary South Africans assert their collective right to democratic participation.

In the Vaal Triangle and New Crossroads, residents have refused to pay their rents for many months. They feel that they have no control over the way in which these funds are spent.

Nation-wide there are consumer boycotts against the state of emergency and the presence of troops in the townships. Collective resistance to forced removals has begun to mark up victories. Everywhere South Africans are organising with increased confidence.

In the Western Cape, where 465 schools have been shut down by ministerial decree, parents, teachers and students challenged the closure. But they were doing more than this; they were asserting that the schools belong to the community not to an illegitimate, minority regime.

We in the UDF are also greatly heartened by the growth of the independent trade union movement. The new federation of unions will represent another step forward in the struggle of the working class on the factory floor and beyond.

The last period has seen, then, the definitive entry of the broad masses of working class and democratic South Africans onto the political stage.

The collapse of the black local authorities, the tri-cameral parliament's lack of all credibility and the effective ungovernability of many parts of South Africa are not the result of an anarchic conspiracy led by the UDF.

As the UDF Transvaal publicity secretary, Sidney Mafumadi, recently put it: "The UDF does not seek to make South Africa ungovernable. Our objective is to make our country governable - under majority, democratic rule."
