

## THE UNIONS AND THE FRONT: A RESPONSE TO DAVID LEWIS

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Given that the State is preparing to introduce the new constitution in an attempt to co-opt sections of the oppressed majority and halt the advance being made in the struggle for a democratic South Africa, it is of vital importance that every effort be made to strengthen and develop the democratic trade union movement and to reject any attempts to isolate workers from the National Democratic Struggle.

With the above in mind, it is necessary that a contribution be made in response to the views expressed by the General secretary of the General Workers Union, David Lewis in regard to working class participation and the nature of this participation in the UDF. Special emphasis is placed on the role that should be played by the trade unions in the broad democratic front.

### Class Alliances.....

Certain points need to be made with regard to the issue of Class Alliance which seems to underlie much of this debate. This debate has sometimes been reduced to the level of individual contributions without the dynamic participation of the class forces themselves, especially the working class.

From our experience in struggle we know that an individual or group's political actions, in terms of what class position they adopt, do not mechanically correspond at every instant to the ultimate interests of their class. Rather, they assume positions which at any given moment, to some degree, depend on political, ideological and historical factors.

It is therefore important to note that continuing national oppression and its resultant limitations, insecurity and deprivation is continually felt by every class and group within the black community.

While the state is attempting, through various concessions, to co-opt groups and individuals within the black community, we must be careful in our endeavours to unite our people for liberation, not to allow positions to be adopted which might push them unwittingly, into the state's camp.

We also have to recognise that there are those whose experience or awareness of national oppression and economic exploitation will prevent them from going all the way in accepting co-option and/or collaboration with the state. These people must constantly be encouraged to play their part in the struggle for national liberation. With this firmly in mind it becomes all the more important that the black working class, as the most determined and consistent force in the struggle for national liberation, must lead the way forward.

Why a Broad Democratic Front?.....

A front is an alliance of a broad spectrum of autonomous organisations of differing class origins who come together having identified a common political grievance. It is a forum, a rallying point, providing structural form which guarantees the broadest possible unity in action of different social groups. It is a mechanism that ensures the maximum concentration of energies and resources of organisations previously acting independently.

The representatives of affiliate organisations of a broad front democratically decide the direction of the front. For instance, if a union or any other organisation feels it cannot take part in a particular campaign, it would make its opposition or inability known. This threatened abstention, hence

the weakening of the campaign, requires a compromise to be forged in order that the broadest unity in taking up the specific political issue at stake be secured. If no compromise is reached the front faces a dilemma and the campaign may fail.

#### Trade Unions: A Particular Organisational Form.....

Much has been made of the "critical" difference between a trade union as an organisational form and other forms of organisation. Trade unions it is said "to all intents and purposes have identical structures". This may be the case but to follow this by asserting, "this is, as far as we see it, what a mass-based organisation means", raises a number of questions.

It must be noted that the organisational form within which any mass-based organisation operates is related to the specific conditions in which such an organisation develops. Likewise, the form of democracy adopted by such organisations is determined by those conditions within which the organisation operates. Any organisation which upholds the principles of democracy has to ensure that maximum participation of its members in decision-making takes place. The concentration of workers within a single factory, concern or industry creates the conditions under which unionists organise. All factories have a limited and fixed number of workers (normally) and the workers are concentrated within that environment for the period of each working day. As such this environment allows the establishment of formal structures, an established membership and regular contact among members of the organisation through the form of shop stewards. This particular form of mass based organisation, made possible by the conditions within which it operates cannot be simply transposed onto all other historical and environmental conditions.

A Mass Base.....

Although it may be desirable that community, womens', student and other organisations establish formal and working structures, this is not always possible. It would be unreal to insist that a student organisation establish formal branch structures from classroom to classroom and school to school in a historical situation where student organisations are banned from the schools. For a community organisation to have a committee in each street may be the ideal, but under certain conditions this is extremely difficult to accomplish. To say as a result that a community organisation does not have a mass base is totally out of touch with the realities of the environment in which those organisers are working. Whatever the conditions, activists must nevertheless continue to build organisation if they are serious about advancing the struggle for fundamental change.

The mass base of organisations which are unable to issue membership cards, collect dues, have dues deducted, pay full-time organisers and operate through formal structures, can only be assessed according to the support their programmes enjoy. Therefore it is primarily in the struggles waged by these organisations that the extent or lack of mass base can be assessed. Even formally structured organisations such as Buthelezi's Inkatha movement cannot be judged as mass based merely on the grounds of their annual membership figures. It is the organisation's ability to act and respond in struggle that exposes the degree of support, or the mass base, that it can call upon. In considering the question of organisational forms and their validity or lack thereof, it is important to note Gramsci's warning not to fetishise any particular form of organisation, but to adapt to the terrain offered by reality.

Working Class Organisation.....

Union organisation has historically been a tremendous step forward for the working class. The emergence of the union organisation has created and solidified workers unity and by spreading organisational experience has advanced the cause of working class organisation. The experience gained through economic struggles serves to raise workers consciousness, develop organisational ability and teach the value of unity and united action.

It is here that the question of the relationship between trade unions and the working class needs to be considered. It seems that there is a tendency to conflate the definition of the working class as a class with that of trade union membership, and hence to see trade unions as the only true form of working class organisation. This tendency emphasises the distinction between the trade unions, which are characterised as single-class organisations and other organisations, which are characterised as multi-class organisations and hence not working class organisations.

Although it is recognised by Lewis that unions do have other elements within them which "influence the mandate that is given", it is asserted that they will always "represent the views of their members". Again it is affirmed that "unions will inevitably be organisations that incorporate a great diversity of political views, ...members with militant political views, and ... members with fairly conservative political views". And yet it is asserted that "workers" and by inference the trade unions themselves "must have a special status in multi-class organisations".

This implied claim by certain trade union leadership to "special status" within multi-class organisation needs to be carefully examined.

Other Forms of Working Class Organisation.....

It is questionable whether trade unions, with their accepted ambiguities, will represent the interests of the working class any better or more thoroughly than community organisations based within the residential areas of the same workers who are members of the trade unions.

To conflate the working class with union membership, is to confine the membership of the working class to union membership only, to the exclusion of dependants (husbands, wives, elderly parents and children) of those union members. Non-unionised workers and the unemployed constitute a vast portion of the working class. The community, women's, student, youth and other organisations based within working class communities, are also in a position to express the views of the working class and are also legitimate organisations of the working class.

It is true that these other mass organisations will include other elements who often participate in the leadership and as activists. But this level of activists, of often petty bourgeois (and sometimes even bourgeois) origins and backgrounds, exist both in the mass organisations and in the trade union movement.

The distinction between trade union struggles and struggles engaged in by other mass based organisations has tended to be exaggerated in an attempt to show that the economic struggles waged by the unions are far more real and working class in nature than other mass based struggles. How real is this distinction within the context of the historical conditions imposed by the apartheid system? Are workers' struggles for higher wages that unrelated to rent boycotts or bus boycotts? Even those community and other struggles which are not so clearly economically based, such as those waged in the schools for a free and better education

system, are issues which directly affect the working class. These issues link the community-based and often more directly political struggles directly to the economic struggles being waged by the unions. Then the broad democratic front which takes up these wider struggles, undoubtedly represents the interests of the working class to the extent that the working class must combine economic struggles with political struggle. It must be recognised that the economic struggle cannot be successful or even conducted on a large scale if workers have not won elementary political rights such as the freedom to organise without the threat of bannings, detentions and the violent breaking of strikes. Although some of these struggles have been won over the last few years these areas still remain contested terrain.

#### Trade Unions and the Broad Democratic Front.....

What is the role of trade unions in relation to the UDF and its affiliate organisations?

The starting point of any programme aimed at securing fundamental changes in society, must be an understanding of who the main enemy is and which is the principal social grouping and its allies on the side of the struggle for such fundamental social change. Looking to other revolutionary experiences, such as those in Vietnam and Nicaragua, teaches us that the progressive forces, unlike the "left" sectarians, drew the broad strata of the population into the revolutionary struggle; and had to struggle for leadership of the democratic organisations of the peasants, small shop owners, professionals, artisans, students and other petty bourgeois strata. In these experiences the working class did not become the leading force of the broad democratic front spontaneously, nor by demanding that "workers must have the opportunity to lead the pace and style and tone and language - in fact the whole discourse - of the organisation".

The mere presence of the union, or of individual members of the unions who are "encouraged" to take part in the broad democratic front is not going to guarantee that the front expresses the view of the working class or has working class leadership. Unions, by the very nature of their organisational forms and activity are not, and cannot be, political parties of the working class. As such they cannot demand to lead the broad democratic front, for as is argued above the working class is not reduceable to trade unions and trade unions do not necessarily even express the views of the working class - do we want to say the Lucy Mvubelo's Garment Workers Union expresses the views of the working class?

The only way the working class can lead the broad democratic front as learnt in the experiences of other struggles, is through active participation within the organisations and structures of the broad democratic front.

The responsibility of the union leadership in this situation, if it has the interests of the working class at heart, demands of them that they lead the union's membership into the broad democratic front and into active participation within all its structures (regardless of their imperfections), to struggle for and ensure maximum working class participation; and finally working class (not just union) leadership of the broad democratic front.

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All direct quotes are taken from WIP No. 29 pp 12-16. See also SALB Vol. 9.2 for full statement by the General Workers Union.