

ONE YEAR OF AN UNBANNED ANC. THE ROAD AHEAD

[February 1991]

It is almost one year since the ANC, SACP and other organisations were unbanned. It is time for us to take stock of what has happened during this period and what lies ahead. In doing this we need to assess the strengths and weaknesses of our antagonists as well as our own. We need to look at the period since Feb 2 1990 critically, not merely for the sake of being critical, but in order to learn from our mistakes and in so doing hasten the process of liberation.

When we look at this short period it is not one that can be summed up in simple phrases. The process of rebuilding the liberation movement as a legal organisation has been slow and difficult. Errors have been made and approaches have not always been correct. At the same time, even before 1990 was over many of these errors were being corrected and the entire approach to the current phase of struggle was being re-examined, in particular in the light of the decisions of the historic, December Consultative conference.

We need to start by restating and confirming without any ifs and buts that our struggle is about power, that it is for transfer of power to the people. It is not about sharing power or dual power, but majority rule. It is to ensure that The People Shall Govern! This was the clear message of the conference and the mood of the delegates. The people will use their power and through that power we will free our country. The decision to dedicate this year to 'Mass action for the transfer of power to the people' also reflects this central focus.

The struggle we are engaged in is a national democratic struggle. It remains essential to hold onto this understanding, to recognise that the special colonial nature of oppression and exploitation in South Africa, has correctly demanded the conduct of a struggle drawing in as many people as possible from all classes and sectors and all parts of our country.

It is also as important as ever to stress its democratic goals, that it seeks to wrest power and privilege from a minority and give political power, economic and social justice to all. To achieve such goals, there must be leadership of the African people and blacks in general, in the forefront of which must be the working class-the section of our people, which through being most oppressed and exploited, has the greatest interest in change.

Power is not something that we expect to just drop into our hands. That is why we say 'a luta continua', 'the struggle continues'. We have to struggle to achieve the revolutionary transformation entailed in changing South Africa from a racist dictatorship into a democracy for all.

WHY AN ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IS ESSENTIAL

It is crucial that we do offer an analysis of the current situation, the balance of forces between those struggling for democracy and those resisting it. We need this type of understanding to map out our priorities, to guide our organisation as to the most important tasks, the actions most likely to speed up the process towards liberation.

It is essential to identify where we are in the struggle, what level of progress has been achieved, what conditions we face, what the strengths and weaknesses of our opponents and ourselves are. We need to assess to what extent our gains are irreversible and the degree to which the obstacles in the way of achieving further goals are removable.

We need this in order to give adequate leadership and also to respond effectively to events initiated by other parties. We may develop brilliant tactics in one situation, but find them totally useless when the situation changes. We need to be alert to changes that may require from us tactical adjustments or more serious strategic shifts.

What we have tended to do, instead, is focus on particular terrains of struggle and tried to deal with issues arising there, without an overall and integrated approach. One day our focus is on the talks about talks and what we have gained or lost from them. The next day the violence preoccupies us [and rightly so] and we set about proving what we know about police complicity etc.

What we have lacked, until now, is an overall strategic perspective linking all of the areas where we fight apartheid, enabling us to identify on a broad scale what the priorities of the time are, and what this means for the various areas of struggle.

Lack of clarity over our direction has bred confusion. Especially dangerous has been the confusion amongst our activist core, the people who are expected to supply the explanations that ordinary members need.

This relates to another problem to which I will return and that is the cleavage that there has sometimes been between the actions of the leadership, the ordinary membership and finally, the masses as a whole. It is important to bridge all of these gaps and this is not the responsibility of the leadership alone.

We all have rights and duties and it is the duty of all of us to exercise our rights and influence the course and direction of ANC policy, to ensure that we explore every democratic channel to do so. One of the key tasks of political educators is to ensure that this happens and that people are equipped to play their role as

members to the full.

FEBRUARY 2 AND AFTERWARDS

The mass defiance campaign of 1989 was the culmination of a decade of upsurge of popular struggle against apartheid and for a democratic alternative. The regime was forced to unban the ANC, SACP and other organisations because of our struggles, inside and outside the country, using a variety of methods, legal and illegal, armed with military weapons and armed with the power of the people, wherever they suffered oppression and exploitation. The government was forced to take drastic action in order to avert a deepening of its crisis.

The fact that the government was compelled to unban and later talk to the ANC did not mean that they would not try to reverse our gains or at the very least, ensure that they dealt with us from a position most advantageous to themselves.

The ANC, unbanned, has never been allowed the same freedom as Inkatha or the Democratic Party. It has always operated under the restrictions of security laws, applied against its supporters and their activities. The period since the unbanning has seen attempts, from our side, to secure unqualified unbanning, while the regime and its allies have been determined to ensure that the ANC faces obstacles not encountered by pro-apartheid and other organisations.

WHAT WERE THE MAIN STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE REGIME AFTER FEBRUARY 2 ?

*To broaden its power base, while at the same time narrowing that of the ANC. It had, in addition, to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the masses, and in a sense, capture the ANC's constituency. It had to project the Nationalist Party in a way completely different from its predecessors, as a party of nonracialism, and indeed one committed to ending apartheid

*One of the ways it sought to achieve this, was to project itself as an indispensable force in the process of transition, both as the manager of the process and the party best placed to achieve it. The regime wanted to control the extent and manner of change, with all parties accepting that no change could occur without its management.

*Together with this, to shift the ideological terrain by depriving the National Democratic Struggle of its national liberation component and presenting the struggle as a contest between 'free enterprise' and

'socialism'[See the paper 'COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN THE MAKING-towards a common perception of violence in the transitional period.]

*To ensure that the ANC was not able to operate freely in establishing an organised presence, e.g. through repression, denial of venues, opportunities to march etc. etc

*To reverse the international gains made by the anti-apartheid forces over the last decades

*To restore investor and business confidence

*If it were to become unavoidable that the ANC be treated as the principal party in negotiations, to ensure that they dealt with leaders in isolation from the masses, that they were removed from their power base.

In such a situation, it was also desirable to try to coopt sections of the leadership, in the process of engagement.

*Since the Communist Party was perceived as a key obstacle in the way of realisation of these goals, it was important to break the ANC's alliance with the Communist Party.

WHAT WERE THE OBJECTIVE PRIORITIES OF THE ANC AFTER FEBRUARY 2?

[We speak of 'objective priorities' because these were not necessarily articulated at the time]

*To build the ANC as a mass, organised, democratic presence

*To build the ANC in campaigns aimed at taking forward the gains of February 2 and strengthening the hands of the negotiators

*To build the ANC with deep roots amongst the masses, as an organisation seen to actively work with the people over their most pressing problems

*To strengthen the revolutionary alliance, now extended to include COSATU, and thus broaden the base behind the ANC and prevent any attempts at driving wedges

*To provide a clear strategic direction, mapping out how the new conditions, after February 2, created possibilities for pursuing the struggle in a more advanced way.

*To maintain the level of mass activity and work out a relationship between the ANC and mass organisations

*To maintain the moral high ground through convincing propaganda and setting the terms of debate.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN THE PERIOD SINCE THE UNBANNINGS?

It is important to note that many of the key contradictions besetting the regime and the consequent conditions which made it possible for the masses to create a crisis, remain in place. In other words, these are objective conditions, inherent in the apartheid state. If correctly understood, these are exploitable by our subjective actions.

At the same time, these are conditions, whose existence and character the government must try to conceal. Certainly their job is to ensure that political struggle is diverted from these nerve centres. Their aim is to try to dictate the terms of struggle in a way that makes us knock on the wrong doors or unbolt those which do not in fact open the way to freedom.

We need to understand that, whatever they have managed to achieve in this period, they have not been able and it is in fact beyond their power to resolve these contradictions. They can only resolve them through conceding power to the people.

*The political crisis within the white ruling bloc has not disappeared. The government has been desperately trying to build a realignment of forces behind itself. But every move to win over DP or Inkatha or other forces to the left of their traditional base, loses part of that base to the right.

Even the NP's attempts to shift the debate over apartheid to one between capitalism [represented by themselves, Inkatha etc] and socialism [allegedly represented by the ANC] together with their privatisation efforts, are objectively dangerous to the white working class's interests.

*Collapse of the entire collaborationist structure -in the bantustans and the local authorities and with the total discrediting of the Indian and Coloured tricameral parties. At the same time as the government knows that these structures are rejected, it also knows that unqualified universal suffrage will be the base for destroying their power and privilege. But it has not got an alternative that will satisfy the people.

*The economic crisis has not diminished. In fact it has

worsened, with nil growth, a continuing accumulation crisis, hyperinflation, massive unemployment etc etc. Economists forecast deepening recession, lasting right through 1991

*At an ideological and moral level, the regime has adopted the language of the liberation movement. [cf DeKlerk's 'end of apartheid' speech, Feb 1 1991] Though we know that this coexists with an actual rejection of the implications of nonracialism and democracy, this same language sows confusion within the civil service and NP ranks and within the ruling bloc as a whole. What we distrust, in their professions of nonracialism, their own support base believes only too readily

* Internationally, it is clear that the regime has made some gains in reversing their isolation, especially in Eastern Europe, and the maintaining of sanctions remains in jeopardy.

Because most of the critical areas for the regime are not resolvable within the framework of reform, it is essential for it to shift debate away from the central issue of power and try to treat the question of transition as a technocratic one, for 'experts' and working groups.

On the whole, the regime has managed to project itself as a decisive actor, initiating the main themes of political debate and setting the pace for political change. The government has used the retreat of February 2 to its advantage. It has presented it as a form of 'new thinking' and evidence of its good faith. This has in turn been used to pressurise the ANC not to 'hold up the process' with 'irrelevant objections', 'unproven allegations' and 'stalling tactics'

The regime managed through much of 1990 to lock the ANC leadership into all sorts of working groups and a type of politics which treats transition as something outside of struggle.

HOW HAS THE ANC HANDLED THE PERIOD SINCE ITS UNBANNING?

The ANC has found itself in a totally new situation. The ANC of today is different from that of 1960. The 30 years of illegality have also stamped on the organisation styles of work that are a product of the conditions of that period, and in many cases inappropriate to the new conditions.

The re-emergence of the ANC as a legal organisation, has meant re-creating a democratic tradition, re-adjusting to operating openly as a legal organisation [given the difficulties placed in the way of fully using this legality, mentioned earlier]

The new ANC is being built by people from a number of different political traditions: the local MDM activists, who, while many may have spent long periods in jail, have been part of an open, democratic tradition, comrades who have operated underground within the country as ANC/SACP operatives in or out of MK, the comrades who have operated from exile under conditions of top security, consequent on great risks to their lives and finally, comrades who have come off the island and out of other prisons where they have consolidated their political thinking through years or decades of discussion and action, mainly within the prison situation.

We all come to this new situation with habits that are different, ones that we often find difficult to modify. So we require time to understand what we can learn and gain from one another. But we have not been given much time. This is one of the reasons why the legal ANC has been created from the top downwards and still shows very many signs of an over-bureaucratized, commandist approach.

WHAT ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF THE ANC'S PROCESS OF RE-ESTABLISHING ITSELF LEGALLY, OVER THE LAST YEAR?

*Until recently, there was a serious failure of the ANC to involve the masses and even its own membership in political struggle. All too often, ordinary people became spectators on the political stage, watching what was being done on their behalf by their leaders.

Happily, this weakness has been addressed, particularly during the onset of the continuing campaign for 'Peace and Freedom Now!' and in the decisions of the December conference. There is now a clear recognition by the entire organisation that for us to take our struggle further, for us to budge the government from apparently immovable positions, requires an ANC deeply rooted in the people and using those people in active struggle

This is, of course, only the beginning and a lot more needs to be done for us to have meaningful contact and involvement of and with our membership. Members and branches need to be involved in campaigns that make their membership meaningful to them, campaigns that they see as linking their actions, even in small matters, to our ultimate goals.

*Until recently, the ANC has not given leadership over the main issues that concern the people. The Programme of Action adopted at the conference and the January 8 statement go some way towards remedying this.

But this is also a problem which needs to be clarified.

We need to understand how the ANC should relate to ordinary, everyday matters that concern ordinary people. While we must recognise the independence of civic and other mass, sectoral organisations, they do not have the sole right to take up issues of daily concern to the people. Any national liberation movement is concerned with everything that affects the people. We must be there when there are shack demolitions, water and electricity cut offs, we must be with the people when they campaign. And we ourselves must be sufficiently close to them to be able to give leadership and direction in their campaigns.

The precise relationship between the ANC and mass formations is complex and will take time to develop. With a view to addressing some of the problems, the following can be suggested:

The civics and other sectoral organisations have during the period of the ANC's banning acted both as sectoral organisations and often, in the eyes of members, as 'ANC people' or as 'ANC organisations'. The presence of the ANC as a legal formation within the country means that the precise character of both mass organisation and ANC involvement, in specific sectors has to be differentiated and also linked. The ANC is not a civic organisation, but it is nevertheless also concerned with civic issues.

In other words, we need to know what is different about the ANC's involvement, say, in the rent question, from that of civics. At the same time, we need to be able to link the contribution of both types of organisations.

The civics are not ANC organisations, though the majority of their members may also be ANC members. They take up day-to-day issues, which are often matters of life and death, for example, housing conditions, electricity and water shut downs etc.

The ANC must also relate to these issues and the people's sufferings and struggles around them. But its way of organising in these sectors is primarily political. This is not to suggest that the civics are non-political. They do recognise the political context of their struggles, but they are not formed as political organisations and not as partisan, ANC structures. It is important that we respect and encourage that.

Given that the ANC is a political organisation in the first place, its way of relating to civic, educational, health and other issues is to relate the specific social

question to broader political questions.

The ANC must help people see that the condition for the relief of the specific grievances of the day, is the removal of broader structures of apartheid. The struggle over rent must be related to the demand for 'housing, security and comfort'. But there cannot be adequate housing or any other social amenity unless the people govern. And where the people govern, without resources, they are powerless to redress basic social grievances. The wealth must therefore be shared amongst the people.

In the first year of legality, the ANC has not always related adequately to the key questions of the time. It is clear that the membership, through their decisions at the conference and the programme of action, intend to ensure that this will be remedied. The ANC can now be expected to be in the forefront of the struggle against the violence, for decent education, for land, decent housing and a living wage. In many cases, it will not be the sole actor over these issues, but its voice will be heard wherever apartheid oppression and exploitation is experienced.

* Until recently, a style of leadership excluding the masses and reducing politics to dialogues with the regime, working groups and endless post-apartheid specialist discussions.

The problem with this approach is not merely that it creates resentment and anger amongst our members and followers. The truth is that it also weakens us in our dealings with the regime. The government must know, when it discusses group privileges or a constituent assembly, that it is not only dealing with Madiba or Thabo Mbeki or Joe Slovo. It must see that behind our negotiators stand millions of ordinary people who will act in support of the demands made at the negotiating table.

The ANC has not grown as quickly as we have wanted and this may be related to the failure to act as a fighting ANC, as a campaigning ANC. The lessons of the ANC's own history point to the need to build the organisation in campaigns. In the defiance campaign of 1952 the organisation's membership rose from 7000 to 100000.

But it is important that we do not fetishise this question of numbers, how many members we have. There is often a tendency to treat recruitment as a technical matter for a special committee of a branch. The ANC

needs to build its membership not merely in a quantitative manner. We need an active, organising, fighting membership, who will be a weapon in the liberation of our country.

It is as important, if not more so, to consolidate the existing membership than to draw in new members. The challenges involved in building a truly mass organisation, composed of people with very different experiences, background and levels of consciousness, is very demanding. Yet we neglect it at our peril.

*One of the areas mentioned as a deepening of the crisis for the regime, the collapse of collaborationist structures has been a success for the ANC. The ANC has been able to detach many of the NP's traditional allies from the government. But even this success has often been one-sided and organisationally damaging. It is a process that has not always been conducted together with the organisations on the ground and has enabled some councillors and bantustan figures to use their contact with sections of the ANC leadership against our people. Statements and decisions at the December conference indicate that both leadership and the membership are addressing the problem

*One of the distinct features of the post February 2 period, is the failure to cement the revolutionary alliance between the ANC, SACP and COSATU. There are now encouraging signs, that steps are being taken to remedy the problems.

In particular areas one can see how the absence of cohesion as an alliance, has affected our policy formulation. If we look at the area of economics, most of the ANC's statements are directed at distancing itself from nationalisation. Without demands for nationalisation, which one knows to be the position of some of the major unions, our policy formulation is skewed.

Hopefully the cementing of the alliance at every level will ensure that there is a dynamic input from all sections of the alliance from every level.

WHAT ARE OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD NOW?

*We need to urgently return to the building of the ANC as

a multi-faceted weapon, paying particular attention to its being deployed in mass struggle in support of mass demands

The December conference and the January 8 statement formulated a programme of action that embodies this perspective

People need to feel part of the ANC and that it is meaningful to belong and to build the organisation. They need to see the relationship between what they do as members and the process leading to the transfer of power. There is no reason to join an organisation if membership means passivity or merely gazing at the actions of your leaders.

*The ANC needs to give bold leadership on a wide range of issues that concern our people. But that leadership must go beyond the ANC membership and extend to all those who have an interest in building a new South Africa, a land of peace and justice.

It is important for the ANC to be seen to play a key role in building the new nation, building a consensus around those issues that bind a wide range of people, including big business. Through common action, for example, against the violence, those ties could deepen into a broader alliance, where more and more people from a very wide range of sectors see the inevitability, not merely of reform but of national liberation.

In advancing this purpose it is essential that the ANC goes further than it has in consultations and discussion of its Constitutional Guidelines. Any projected constitution needs to be discussed in our branches and within the structures of our alliance partners and in that of as many organisations and structures who are interested. It is an important facet of national liberation that this new constitution be seen and understood by all to be a victory of the people, as something that they have made, unlike every other one in this country's history.

* To achieve any of the above priorities demands a different conception of the ANC itself. It is essential that the question of internal democracy becomes prioritised, that members feel they have a part in organisational decisions, that they are consulted and that they have a meaningful role in the organisation. For any organisation that has to struggle to achieve its goals, it cannot afford, let alone encourage, passivity amongst its members.

We need to make the ANC a mass-based, democratic organisation, focused on campaigns and other activities, where all its members and the masses in general can contribute towards the destruction of apartheid and the creation of a nonracial, nonsexist and democratic

South Africa.

POSTSCRIPT

Having written that, it may be that insufficient weight has been placed on the achievement that the rebuilding of the legal ANC, whatever its defects, has been. The new ANC has been built under very difficult conditions, and in a very short period of time, since the unbanning.

Perhaps the most important thing to note is that there are reasons for optimism, now. The incremental growth of branches has taken off and there is now a qualitatively new situation, with the launch of elected branches and regions. For the first time in 30 years there is an elected, internal regional leadership. This may have given much more scope for involvement of the ordinary membership and one hopes, will help sustain and develop the resumed mass struggles in support of our most fundamental demands.