

at issue:

Forms of Organisation

Non-racialism is the policy of a number of groups describing themselves as progressive. The form of organisation most appropriate to a non-racial position is, however, the subject of intense disagreement. A contributor explores some of the issues.

INTRODUCTION

Most progressive organisations today subscribe in principle to a policy of non-racialism. A sharp tendency towards ethnic thinking has been evident, however, in the last few years amongst a broad group of organisations and individuals, and noticeably among white progressives.

Ethnic thinking in this context is that view which sees the need, either for ideological or strategic/practical reasons, to organise the race groups as separate bases, albeit linked 'at the top'.

The article examines some recent events in order to try and identify ethnic thinking where it emerges. Some examples are looked at and an attempt is made to analyse the consequences and implications of this type of thought.

The article focuses mainly on events affecting the white progressive groupings, since the concept of a 'white left' or 'white democrats' as a distinct grouping has been a particularly prominent one in the resurgence of ethnic thinking. This does not imply that other groupings do not also display ethnic thinking, nor that the class implications of ethnic thinking among blacks is unimportant. Indeed, one of the possible causes of ethnic thinking among whites is the strong historical and current presence of ethnic thinking among blacks. There has also been strong support in some black quarters for ethnic practices in the white grouping.

THE PAST - THE 1950s AND 1960s

At the beginning of 1983 the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) was re-established after a period of decades of inactivity. Many views have been expressed about this event, few of them positive. An interview with a United Democratic Front (UDF) leader in the Transvaal, questioning him about the TIC, was published in a recent issue of SASPU National. The SASPU interviewer tried to get responses to the view that TIC was an ethnic organisation and a step backwards in popular organisation. The replies all referred to the past (1950s and 1960s), and did not answer the question of the current relevance of ethnically separate organisations.

↓ The organisational model of this past (1950s and 1960s) took the form of distinct organisations for africans, coloureds, indians and whites, with a further separate organisational form for workers. These organisations were linked at the top by a set of alliances between the leadership organising the respective ethnic bases (the Congress Alliance).

The linking of present organisational strategy to the past is part of a new phenomenon. Old organisational models have been rediscovered and put forward energetically with very little open debate about their appropriateness to the 1980s.

THE RECENT PAST - THE 1970s AND 1980s

The 1970s and the 1980s have been characterised by a different type of organisational activity. This has been focused more on the grassroots, or the bottom - that is the mass potential membership of civics, student organisations, trade unions and women's organisations. These have constituency-based membership and operate in different 'sites of struggle', such as for example,

place of residence, the workplace, women's oppression and education.

Most of these organisations have been non-racial in principle. Some have been non-racial in practice as well, in that they have members from all race groups.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The immediate past has seen a new emphasis on ethnic organisational models in a context (that of organising within different sites of a supposedly non-racial struggle) that is rather different from the 1950s and 1960s.

Firstly, there have been attempts to set up ethnic political groupings. In the late-1970s there was an attempt to re-establish the Coloured People's Congress (CPC). This was not generally accepted in the Cape and never came to fruition. The re-establishment of the TIC has already been mentioned.

Secondly, local constituency organisations have in some cases been set up on ethnic lines. It is argued that this is because legislation like the Group Areas Act (affecting civics) and the Separate Universities Act (affecting students) makes it difficult to organise across the races. This is certainly a practical problem that needs to be addressed. However, where such problems are not an issue, ethnic models still persist.

Popular community organisation in the Western Cape, for instance, is separated not only on an area basis, but also along ethnic lines. There are three federated umbrella bodies for civic organisations, one for africans, and two for coloureds. Another example is the case of the campuses, where the so-called 'white' universities now have a number of black students who at present still organise themselves separately, either in black student societies, or as part of AZASO, the grouping based at the 'tribal' or black campuses.

NON-RACIAL BODIES AND ETHNIC THINKING - AN EXAMPLE

The tendency to ethnic thought and action is not confined only to the setting up of separate organisations. Within a non-racially constituted body like the United Women's Organisation (UWO) one can observe tendencies to organise along racial lines.

The UWO organises members from all race groups. Partly because of the Group Areas Act and residential segregation and partly because of the way areas for branches were defined, a number of branches became mainly, but not exclusively, white in composition.

A line of thinking that emerged within these branches, among other lines of thought, argued that whites were a special case in the organisation and should participate differently from other race groups in inter-branch situations. On the other hand, proponents of this position also argued that the 'white branches' should conduct their own branch activity in the same way as the other branches, ie by organising among white residents in their areas.

This ethnic thinking manifested itself in different ways. It was felt that whites should not occupy positions that were prominent in the organisation. They should be careful not to 'dominate' at inter-branch meetings where members of other race groups are present. They should not occupy organisational positions that would bring them into contact with the black grassroots on a regular basis.

With the advent of the President's Council (PC) constitutional proposals and the Koornhof Bills, this line of thought argued that the 'white' branches had to think of ways in which they could contribute as 'white' branches to the struggle against the Bills, and how the campaign could be taken up in the broader white community. A workshop was organised to discuss joint strategy for the 'white' branches. One of the initiatives is to seek alliances of some sort between the 'white' branches and mainly white liberal organisations.

To test the feasibility of organising whites in their area around 'community issues', one of the 'white' branches conducted a residents' survey in their area. This confirmed the well-known racism of the white lower petty bourgeois community members living there.

Another initiative in the same area sought to mobilise community response and opposition to a potential community facility (a disused building) being allocated for paramilitary civil defence training purposes by the City Council. It could be argued that the majority of residents in this area would regard civil defence as a welcome community service!

Constituencies in the UWO are in the first instance defined along Group Areas

lines. Since this is the case, the presence of an ethnic line, which encourages the members of the 'white' branches to see the constituency of whites as their area of activity, and which restricts non-racial contact, subtly erodes the non-racial potential of the UWO.

THE MILITARY CONSCRIPTION ISSUE AND ETHNIC THINKING

The military conscription issue has been seen by some as one around which whites can organise whites. The issue has not been very openly debated even at an abstract level. Those arguments that have been put forward, however, are a further example of ethnic thinking.

Progressive white potential conscriptees have attempted to seek alliances with liberal white organisations, like the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) and the churches. The military issue is seen as one capable of drawing sympathy from within these white liberal groupings; it is assumed that a large section of white liberals will support the view that South Africa is fighting an unjust war, and lend their weight to those resisting conscription.

One of the goals is, therefore, to extend the base of broad white organisation among these groups, as well as among the families and friends of potential conscriptees. The ethnic categories of thought used here are in this case reinforced by the attitudes of some members of the black community who are demanding that whites 'show where they stand'.

A strong argument for conscientious objection has been made, and it is felt that this stand could be supported by these potential alliances. It is also anticipated that organisational gains for the white left will ensue. Apart from leaving the country, alternative strategies are not really allowed for.

Recent events constitute a defeat for this strategy. Alliances with the PFP, in particular, have failed, and the state has imposed a prohibitive prison term for conscientious objectors. Pressure among white left conscriptees and supporters of the strategy outlined above has made conscientious objection and exile the only options, and is closing off other options and tactics for dealing with the difficult conscription problem. As a result; the population of white

progressive males may be severely reduced in the near future, and a substantial part of the progressive white grouping may disappear.

THE RACIAL CONTRADICTION

The above examples outline some of the manifestations of ethnic thinking, which, whether conscious or not, gives rise to an ethnic strategy adopted by many different groupings. Although most of these groupings claim to be on the left, there has been little evidence of class analysis in the theoretical development of this strategy.

Most would agree that the different experiences of oppression of the different race groups (the racial contradiction) are an extremely important factor in understanding struggle in South Africa. The categories imposed by the South African state do have real effect. But how is this racial contradiction to be dealt with?

One strategy is to develop ethnically distinct organisational forms, which take into account these racial differences, as the most effective way of organising. Contact between the races is built in at the top (leadership level) by means of alliances between the ethnically defined bodies, whether they are characterised as white/black, or white/coloured/african.

An alternative strategy would be to organise in such a way that the racial contradiction is confronted at as many levels as possible; starting at the bottom. The struggle to overcome the racial problem is thus open to mass participation. People at all levels learn to cope with it, and become clearer about the methods required to build a non-racial society.

HOW DOES CLASS ANALYSIS FIT IN - THE CASE OF PROGRESSIVE WHITES

It is useful to look at the possibilities for extending organisation among white progressives. These individuals in South Africa have always been and will continue to be a peculiar collection of intellectuals. They are mainly defectors from the bourgeoisie and the upper petty bourgeoisie which is closely linked to the bourgeoisie.

Their situation is rather similar to that of left intellectuals in other

countries where the racial contradiction is absent. In these countries they are a minority of members of the bourgeoisie and upper petty bourgeoisie. Their small numbers illustrate the limitations of trying to extend a left base among members of these classes. Left intellectuals may ally themselves very productively and progressively with the oppressed classes - the working class and classes such as the lower petty bourgeoisie which are closely linked to the working class.

The racial contradiction in South Africa makes it difficult to see the white left for what they are, and to understand their limitations as an independent grouping able to extend its own base.

The ethnic approach to the problems of organising white progressives further obscures class considerations.

On the one hand, the boundary between the white left intelligentsia and the liberal bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie is confused. This gives rise to the danger of unprincipled alliances.

On the other hand, the limitations of the white left grouping are not adequately recognised. This gives rise to strategies that have little chance of succeeding, or that do not contribute to the democratic experiences of progressives in general.

Two outcomes are likely:

1. Alliances between white leftists and white liberals which are bound to be dominated by the interests of the bourgeoisie and upper petty bourgeoisie because of their political strength and numbers. In such alliances, where the right has the best chance of dominating (right opportunist alliances), the interests of white progressives will not gain the upper hand. This will not aid the development of a popular democracy.
2. White left organisations which are forced to be undemocratic in order to exclude and suppress white liberal elements which would outnumber them (since liberalism is more representative of the white grouping than leftism because of the class composition of whites). These organisations tend to be small and rather ineffective and may generate bad experiences for building a future democratic and non-racial society.

DISORGANISING THE RULING CLASS? - THE QUESTION OF ORGANISATIONAL GAINS

It is frequently argued that the white left, through an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, may disorganise the 'ruling class'. The question this raises is: what are the potential splits in this 'ruling class'?

If a class analysis of the white 'ruling class' is made, what evidence is there for a possible disorganising effect that could be brought about by white left elements? Is there a sizeable fraction that could be split off from the block of ruling classes?

The bourgeoisie in South Africa generally take a reactionary position. The upper petty bourgeoisie is very closely bound up with the bourgeoisie, and their positions on the whole reflect this close linkage. By a strange paradox, in South Africa, only a small fraction of the bourgeoisie, the monopolist bourgeoisie, takes a relatively liberal position. In this, it takes along with it a small section of the upper petty bourgeoisie.

The question must still be asked: even if there is a 'liberal' fraction of the 'ruling class' that may be split off from the block of ruling classes, whose ideology would dominate in an alliance with white progressives? That of the white progressives or that of the liberal bourgeoisie?

A small group of representatives of the line of monopoly capital is unlikely to be dominated by a numerically and politically much smaller and weaker group of white progressives.

The middle and lower petty bourgeoisie and what remains of the white working class will not even be seriously considered since they are even more strongly bound up in South Africa with clearly reactionary elements of the ruling classes.

What is left then is a smallish fraction of the upper petty bourgeoisie as a field in which to create a disorganizational effect. This constituency is mainly students at the universities - those who do not automatically take up the more reactionary positions of the upper petty bourgeoisie as a whole. The problem remains that very few people, even within this fraction of a fraction, become progressive.

The method by which some do become progressive is an idiosyncratic one rather than a natural development.

At the universities an area of struggle

goes on at an ideological level. Ideas from the left are discussed and debated, which does not happen in any other 'ruling class' institution. This struggle influences students in an ad hoc and unpredictable manner. Some may undergo an ideological conversion, via the changing of ideas through study, exposure to intellectual works and debate. This method takes a long time. It takes even more time for individuals to come to a thorough understanding of the nature of their society that carries over into action for the rest of their lives.

The process by which whites become progressive then, severely limits their numbers. It also places a serious limit on the 'organisational gains' that can be made among the 'white base' - whether white progressive or broad white.

The vast majority of this fraction of the upper petty bourgeoisie proceed straight to bourgeois ideological positions as a natural development, and become formidable proponents of their class interests, whether liberal or not. The material base on which they do so is their entry into the class places of the bourgeoisie and upper petty bourgeoisie.

ALTERNATIVES TO ETHNIC THINKING IN THE STRUGGLE FOR NON-RACIAL DEMOCRACY

The only hope for future democracy is to ensure that those popular elements that have a class interest in democratic structures and practices play the dominant role in progressive organisations. There can, of course, be no guarantees of democracy, but the participation of mainly popular elements in these organisations offers the best chance for democracy. In this respect the working class participation is particularly important. Only strong participation by the working class and allied classes can prevent domination by the bourgeoisie and its allied classes, and ensure democratic practices in broad organisations which include representatives of all progressive forces of the nation.

In South Africa this would mean going for thorough alliances from the bottom to the top between all progressive groupings. It would mean non-racial organisation, not only at the top, but also at the base among the grassroot membership. Instead of organising along ethnic lines where this is inappropriate, intellectuals

could work progressively with organisations in ways that concretely break down and overcome racial contradiction in day to day activity.

THE DEMOCRATIC FRONT MOVEMENT

The democratic front that is currently appearing in South Africa might offer a good possibility for an alternative to ethnic organisation. It is being set up to combat the ethnic lines of the state. If this were to become an open internal political movement of the oppressed, which combined organisational and individual membership, it could provide an important forum for working out the contradictions between the popular elements in South Africa.

At a regional level areas could be specifically designed to facilitate non-racial organisation rather than accepting Group Areas definitions. Groupings that do not have a political home at present, like white progressives for instance, would no longer be isolated. This could in the long run lay the foundation for a real non-racial democratic future South Africa.