

# The Working Class in National Democratic Struggle

Recently, WIP contributor Duncan Innes argued that the Freedom Charter was not an adequate basis for unity between the popular and working-class movements. TONY KARON and MAX OZINSKY disagree, arguing that the working class is already stamping its leadership onto the national democratic struggle.

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Duncan Innes (WIP 41) believes he has advanced the debate between Alec Erwin and Jeremy Cronin (SA Labour Bulletin 11[2&3]) on the working class and the national democratic struggle.

The major question posed by Innes concerns the relationship between the 'popular movement' and the 'working-class movement'. On the one hand he is critical of trade union economism, but on the other sees a danger of working-class interests being submerged in the popular movement. The Freedom Charter as the basis for popular unity in South Africa, says Innes, does not guarantee the interests of the working class, and will inevitably block its ability to assert those interests. He argues that a workers' charter should instead form the basis of unity.

At the outset, it is necessary to warn against becoming carried away with a sense of pioneering importance of discussions between intellectuals in WIP. Innes pays lip service to the notion that questions of working-class leadership will ultimately be resolved in practice, but remains detached from the concerns of that process. These questions are being debated and implemented where it really matters; they are the focus of intense discussion and practical work in the trade unions, in the street committees, in the people's education programme. The pages of *Isizwe*, the UDF theoretical journal, are filled with debates around the practical building of working-class leadership in the democratic struggle. Erwin and Cronin refer to such developments in mass organisations, but Innes is rather dismissive: '(U)ntil such developments are combined in a coherent form which the workers' movement can use as a basis for

mobilising and linking up with others, their usefulness is limited'.

To intellectuals only satisfied with paper guarantees perhaps this is so. But in the heat of struggle where these questions are being resolved they are of infinitely more utility than detached debates about programmes.

For Innes, 'divisive concepts' must be jettisoned in pursuit of 'unity': but unity in the struggle is not principally based on mutually accepted concepts, nor, ultimately, on a shared programme for reconstruction. It is dependent on a willingness in different organisations to struggle together in the field for the achievement of mutual objectives despite programmatic and conceptual differences.

Innes examines questions of programmes only with reference to the task of reconstruction in a society already liberated from minority rule. He consistently fails to confront the questions, both programmatically and practically, of reaching that stage of liberation.

## THE WORKING CLASS AND POLITICS

Innes' basic dichotomy between a 'popular movement' consisting mostly of community-based organisations 'inspired by the Freedom Charter', and a 'working-class movement', the trade union movement, is puzzling. He himself criticises as 'syndicalism' Erwin's tendency to focus on the factory floor as the prime form of politics, and to derive other political forms from that arena. Yet Innes' own concept of a working-class movement appears to be



firmlly grounded within that approach. He creates the impression that the working class is suddenly faced, for the first time, with the challenge of inserting itself into the popular struggle in a leading position. This ignores the reality of working-class participation in the liberation struggle at all levels, both in the past and present, and the working-class political tradition in that struggle.

Innes' dichotomy stems from the construction of an imaginary working-class persona operating within an ideal-type 'working-class politics', (phenomena originally introduced in Joe Forster's keynote address to the 1982 FOSATU Congress). It takes a very partial view of the consciousness of the working class, assuming that this is formed almost exclusively by the factory experience. Thus, workers appear to have a cosmopolitan consciousness, with very little that is nationally specific about it; they observe the popular movement from a distance, pondering when to intervene to secure their specific interests.

Working-class consciousness cannot be equated with idealist notions or separated from an understanding of all the steps necessary for the achievement of a socialist society.

Working-class political consciousness includes an understanding of the interests of other classes, the extent to which their interests differ from those of the working class, as well as the basis on which alliances may be forged with those classes. It is only from concrete experiences of working-class involvement in the national democratic struggle that this consciousness can develop.

In reality, the working class is an essential component of the nationally oppressed people, and this has a profound effect on its politics. It is intellectuals who ponder whether the working class should be involved in the national liberation struggle. Workers themselves do not make the rigid distinctions between their factory-floor experience and their broader political and social experiences. These bind them to, rather than separate them from, other sectors of the oppressed, and the national liberation struggle.

This is reflected in the content of much of the cultural work done by FOSATU workers, and in the songs, slogans and demands which characterised the launch

of COSATU. It is reflected in the strength of people's organisations in areas where unions are strong. For example, when the Metal and Allied Workers Union formed the East Rand People's Organisation, it did not remain outside the popular movement - it became the strongest UDF affiliate on the East Rand. Advanced and organised workers are not distinguishing themselves as a separate grouping outside of the popular movement in the way that Innes is.

The key question, which Innes has failed to pose, is that of building working-class leadership within the popular movement. The way in which trade unions, as a particular organisational form, relate to community-based structures is one of the questions to be posed in this respect. But it is not the only one.

**ON THE CHARACTER OF THE STRUGGLE**

Innes rather pretentiously sees himself and Fine joining Erwin and Cronin in 'breaking new theoretical ground', with the 'divisive concepts' of the past having been abandoned by all. In particular he lauds the jettisoning of the 'usual two-stage argument'. While critical of Erwin's 'syndicalism', he rejects Cronin's assertion that the 'dilemma' of relating 'transformational politics to liberation politics' is one of Erwin's own making: 'The dilemma cannot be glossed over so easily. One thinks of the course of liberation struggles in Spain, Greece or Chile... where the interests and demands of the working class were sacrificed to promote (unsuccessfully) a broad-based popular unity against oppressive powers' (p 13).

It is not particularly helpful to trot out three 'examples' of popular unity 'subordinating' working-class interests, assuming we are all familiar with the processes in these situations which substantiate his arguments. Innes needs to substantiate the case he is making from such assertions. In the case of Greece, is he referring to the struggle against Nazi occupation, or to the struggle against domestic reaction in the 1940s and 1960s, or to post-dictatorship events? Lazy references of this kind prevent us from giving a serious answer.

In the case of Spain (assuming that Innes is referring to the 1930s), the



working class united with other republican strata in defence of their republic against a Fascist military onslaught backed by imperialism. There is no question that the working class was unable to complete a socialist transformation.

But if the working class had abandoned the Popular Front and proceeded with a socialist programme, this would have brought the collapse of the republic a few years forward. The defence of the republic was the most immediate and vital task of the Spanish proletariat.

Innes seems to imply that had the Chilean working class abandoned popular unity in pursuit of a more rapid socialist transformation, the outcome there (a military coup sponsored by US imperialism) may have been different. Other commentators have suggested the opposite. Random worker occupation of small and economically unimportant businesses was promoted by the ultra-left, who were unhappy at the pace of nationalisation undertaken by the popular unity government. This contributed directly to the alienation of the petty bourgeoisie from the popular unity, and strengthened domestic support for imperialist intervention. Hence the weakening of the popular unity actually contributed to a working-class defeat.

Innes' treatment of these examples reveals a central weakness in his argument: the notion that the interests of the working class are subordinated in popular struggle unless those struggles are fought on the basis of a socialist programme.

We can pose this argument in reverse: although there have been a number of instances of popular fronts suffering defeat, there has never been an instance of working-class victory without the working class having engaged in popular alliances. Indeed, would the Chilean working class ever have been able to create the potential for socialism, which it did, if the popular unity had not included a programme for the middle class? Viet Nam, Angola, Nicaragua and many other examples all speak volumes on the ability of popular alliances to advance the position of the working class.

To understand the tasks of the working class in relation to other classes, we need to clarify the character of the struggle in South Africa.

## STAGES IN THE STRUGGLE

We need to be more careful about what jettisoning of the 'usual two-stage argument' entails. We assume 'two-stage argument' means a mechanical separation between the tasks of establishing democracy and of social emancipation. These are slotted into 'stages' separated by a chasm in time. The implication is that the second set of tasks is only placed on history's agenda when the first set is complete. But there is no 'usual' two-stage argument - there have been many, from a wide variety of political positions.

The question of building the path to full social emancipation cannot wait until the achievement of formal democracy in South Africa. It is the process by which the national democratic tasks are completed that will determine the character of the society which follows, and the extent to which progress towards complete emancipation from exploitation will be uninterrupted.

However, this does not deny the existence of historically-distinct stages, phases or moments through which our struggle must pass. These are not determined by the programme or outlook of particular organisations, but mark an objective and historically-determined route along which we pass. In rejecting a mechanical separation between stages, we do not reject the idea of the national democratic struggle as defining the character of the South African struggle.

The national democratic struggle is the path necessarily followed by the struggle for socialism in South Africa. This is a result of the particular nature of South African capitalism - a structure of minority rule and national oppression which has persisted, in essence, from the colonial era.

The national democratic struggle unites all classes among the oppressed, together with democratic whites, behind the pursuit of democracy and national self-determination. It is not in itself the struggle for socialism, nor is it simply a socialist programme which incorporates a challenge to racism. The system of minority rule, through which political power is organised, is the immediate obstacle to socialism in South Africa. Only when that system has been abolished does the possibility of social emancipation arise. Democracy is the vital condition for the completion of



the process of education, mobilisation and organisation of the masses necessary for the transition to socialism.

The immediate objective of the working class is therefore the marshalling of all possible social forces for the eradication of minority rule and its replacement by democracy. The deeper that democracy, the greater the prospects for uninterrupted social transformation.

The national democratic struggle is not an unfortunate detour on the road to socialism: the present national popular mobilisation against the regime gives tremendous momentum to the struggle for socialism in South Africa.

The various classes among the oppressed are united, not by an ideological smokescreen which hides their different class interests, but on the basis of their common, but diverse, class antagonism to the colonial structure of minority rule, a political and economic phenomenon which prevents any significant sector of the oppressed from realising their class interests.

This is not to argue that all classes among the oppressed have identical class interests, but rather that their different interests coincide on the question of eradicating minority rule. The method of that eradication, and the depth of the democracy which replaces it, is the essential class question of the national democratic struggle.

The manner in which Innes rejects the 'usual two-stage theory' is such that he rejects, in practice, all phases, stages and moments in the struggle. There is an inability to deal with struggle as a contradictory process. The specific, the concrete and the historical are all evaporated. Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in Innes' dry, constitutional handling of the Freedom Charter.

It is true that Innes introduces some historical remarks about the compilation of the Freedom Charter. But these remarks (passed on from Fine, who gets them from heaven knows where) simply underline our point: history is gaily flattened out into a timeless debate between 'socialists' and 'populists', between 'transformation' and 'liberation'.

We are told, for instance, without any evidence being offered, that workers and worker leaders were unhappy about the Charter in 1955-6, and that the socialist wing of the Congress Alliance

felt betrayed. If anything, the opposite was the case. It was the right-wing Africanist group, still within the ANC at that stage, who opposed not only the non-racialism of the Charter's preamble, but also its 'communist' nationalisation clause. The radical liberal centre of the ANC was also unhappy with this clause (see Luthuli's *Let My People Go* for a candid commentary on this). At the time the official adoption of the Charter by the ANC in 1956 was widely seen as a victory for the left (see for example *Drum* of December 1955). But in essence, the Charter was and is neither a victory for the left in the national liberation movement, nor a populist sell-out. It is a document with a very wide following, providing general guidelines for all democrats in South Africa. While not a socialist programme, it certainly does not put a lid on socialism.

Our approach differs fundamentally from Innes, who seems to imply that the working class either participates in the struggle for freedom on the basis of its full programme, or not at all.

The Freedom Charter, says Innes, makes too many compromises, and therefore inhibits the development of 'working-class politics'. We believe that the full programme of the working class will not be realised in one process, and that it faces the continual task of removing the immediate obstacles to its progress.

Innes' narrow approach to alliances fails to confront the structure of political power in South Africa, and the concrete tasks of shifting those power relations to favour the working class. It is the task of the working class to weld together the broadest force - on the basis that other classes share a particular immediate objective of the working class - to most rapidly and effectively remove each obstacle in the path of progress.

Failure to win every potential ally at every point, no matter how temporary, vacillating or conditional those allies may be, betrays the interests of the working class. This is because it delivers potential allies into the hands of the regime, thereby reinforcing obstacles in the path of the working class.

#### WORKING-CLASS LEADERSHIP

Innes' approach to the development of



working-class leadership is largely based on programmes. In his view the major failing of the Freedom Charter is that it does not outline a complete working-class programme. He therefore concludes with a call for a new programme or 'workers' charter' to ensure that the process of transformation is not tackled in a piecemeal way.

Innes examines the question of programmes only at the level of programmes for reconstruction after minority rule. He fails to confront the question of programmes and practices of the struggle to reach that point, to actually liberate South Africa from minority rule. Innes states that 'lack of political awareness has led many union members to believe that the Freedom Charter will liberate them from capitalist oppression - when in fact it does not even give them the right to strike' (p 15). This is reflective of the facile constitutionalism which runs through his discussion of the Charter. He examines the Freedom Charter as if it is the constitution of a liberated society, and concludes that it does not contain sufficient guarantees for the working class.

But the Freedom Charter is not a constitution, nor is it a programme of action. To debate it as such is to miss the living reality of the Charter in the actual process of struggle. The Charter is a document which outlines the objectives of the national democratic struggle, and the tasks of the national democratic state, whose fullest accomplishment will allow the process of democratisation to develop into a process of transformation.

The extent of achievement of those objectives depends on the balance of social forces which develops in the struggle. Here the programmes of action which are designed to achieve the objectives of the national democratic struggle, and the practices which they promote, must be examined. Debating the Freedom Charter as a constitution will tell us very little about the actual development of working-class leadership in the struggle.

The Charter does not represent the final word on questions of liberation and transformation. There is an established tradition of groupings - both on the left and the right - locating the Charter within their view of a post-apartheid society. There have

also been instances of charters emanating from particular sectors of the liberation movement amplifying their particular interests in relation to the Freedom Charter (eg the Women's Charter and the proposed Education Charter).

Innes' proposal for the drafting of a workers' charter is not inconsistent with the character of the Freedom Charter. But he insists on a workers' charter as the basis of unity between the working class and other classes in the popular movement. He thereby outlines a view of struggle which makes working-class participation in alliance with other classes conditional on those classes accepting the complete programme of the working class.

To speak of the working class seeking allies in its struggle acknowledges that while these allies share some of the interests of the working class, they also have important differences in outlook. The working class seeks these allies because it is unable, on its own, to complete tasks which are vital to its advancement. If we accept that the unity of the different classes in the national democratic struggle is not an identity of interests, how can we propose that unity be based on the complete programme of the working class?

But the problems of Innes' approach to development of working-class leadership run deeper than this. The leadership of the liberation struggle is not the inherent preserve of any class or group. The character, form and outcome of the liberation struggle is determined by the relative strength of the different groups which participate within it. To withdraw the participation of the working class from the liberation struggle because the programme of the liberation movement is not the full programme of the working class is the surest recipe for the eclipse of the working class in the struggle. Moreover, to imagine that the national-democratic tasks of the struggle can be by-passed is simply to delay the achievement of social emancipation.

**BUILDING PEOPLE'S POWER**

The task of transforming society cannot be separated from the process of liberating it. As observed earlier, the essential class question of the national



democratic struggle is the depth of democracy achieved by it.

Transformation is only possible if the liberation struggle ensures the development of direct democracy based on organs of people's power. These are the crucial source of the power of the working class in the national democratic state, and hence the foundation of an uninterrupted transition to socialism.

Innes' failure to properly grasp the class questions that are resolved within the popular movement runs through his critique of the Freedom Charter. The Charter is the common programme of all the classes in the national liberation struggle. The fact that it does not reflect only working-class demands is an indication of its multi-class origins.

This is not to suggest that the Charter inhibits the development of working-class leadership in the national liberation struggle. Working-class leadership in that struggle has to be built; it cannot be guaranteed by any charter.

The intense battles of 1985-6 have forged nascent structures of popular power in many townships: people's courts, alternative education, street and area committees. Other similar structures have emerged throughout the country. At the forefront of these structures have been organisations which endorse the Freedom Charter.

It is through the building up of democratic organs of people's power that the Charter is being implemented by its supporters on the ground. This makes Innes' comment that 'organisations tend to resort to sloganeering and pay mere lip service to (the Charter's) goals' (p 14) reflect his distance from real political struggle.

The importance of structures of people's power in the process of transformation cannot be underestimated. Although initially formed as defensive structures against state repression, they are being transformed into democratic organs of people's power. They fill the gap created by the demolition of state structures in the townships, and through their democratic character ensure that the struggle remains under a firm political leadership and is not hijacked by anti-social elements.

The gains made by these structures are not irreversible, and they are continually open to attack from both the state and divisive elements in the

community. These communities are also continuously aware that in replacing state administration, they face the danger of sliding into reformism. This issue is the subject of constant debate and vigilance (eg Isizwe 1(2), p 12).

The basic units of these structures are street and area committees, and they therefore depend on the involvement of all sectors of the community, including the working class, in the liberation struggle. At the same time their mass-based character allows the development of a disciplined democracy and an accountable leadership within the communities, which is an important step in stopping the development of elitism and individualism.

We have continually stressed that the crucial class question in the national democratic struggle is the depth of democracy developed through that struggle. This is not an abstract question. It is given an immediate and concrete meaning in the creation of structures of people's power. The extension and deepening of these structures creates the most favourable situation for the working class relative to other classes in the national democratic struggle.

**THE WAY FORWARD**

The South African working class, as a real social force rather than an abstract category of analysis, has begun to stamp its leadership onto the unfolding national democratic struggle. This process is uneven, and certainly not complete or final. But it has dramatically affected the character of the structures which channel the political energies of the masses.

The depth of the democracy won in this struggle is no longer left to abstract projection: hundreds of thousands of ordinary South Africans in the schools, mines, factories and communities have asserted their ability to answer these questions.

It is in the building of people's power, and not in constitutional debate, that the Freedom Charter is given meaning. Sooner or later, this process must impact on university-based intellectuals, and guide discussion in this arena.