

perspectives

NUMSA: “asijiki!”

Forward to a Mass Workers Party on a Socialist Programme

The most significant political aftershock of the Marikana massacre was undoubtedly the historic December 2013 Special National Congress (SNC) of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) – Africa’s largest trade union. It resolved to withdraw support from the ANC – which Marikana affirmed most emphatically as a party of capital – setting in motion a process that could lead to the foundation of a workers party. These resolutions were to be implemented by establishing a United Front (UF) to engage working class communities and a Movement for Socialism (MfS) to bring together left political formations. NUMSA’s locals have now been mandated to establish Political Discussion Forums to assemble the forces for the formation of the UF with working class community organisations and left political organisations.

by Weizmann Hamilton

Until now, the Achilles Heel of the implementation of the SNC resolutions has been the absence of a socialist programme as a foundation for the UF. This fact had cast doubt on whether the MfS or the UF were in fact preparatory steps towards a workers party. Suggestions that the SNC resolutions committed NUMSA to no more than “exploring the possibility” of establishing a workers party, reinforced this.

However, since then, the call “Asijiki!” with which NUMSA President Comrade Chirwa opened his address to the Numsa International Symposium in August, reflects the firm view within the NUMSA rank-and-file that there is no turning back from a workers party.

This has been followed by the NUMSA leadership’s proposal that the emergent UF should debate the Freedom Charter as a programme. We believe this to be an important step forward in spite of the fact that the Charter is not a socialist programme. The debate on the Charter has the potential to provide much needed clarity on the main strategic objective of the setting up of the MfS and the UF; that it is not an end in itself but aimed at the formation of a workers party.

Leaving a vacuum

By not taking a firm position on the 2014 elections, NUMSA had left many workers doubtful about its commitment to breaking with the ANC. Some NUMSA leaders even insisted that the SNC resolutions withdrawing political and financial support from the ANC could not be interpreted as a call not to vote ANC.

Yet, the SNC had decided that any party NUMSA supported would have to be: (1) socialist (2) based on the working class, (3) democratic and, (4) have a track record of struggle. This

campaign for its programme. For the working class, the critical challenge is to ensure the programme expresses its class interests.

The absence of a clear socialist programme has sealed the fate of many a liberation movement, workers, socialist, communist, social democratic and labour party through the world. The restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union set in train an ideological retreat that led to the obliteration of the last remaining vestiges of socialism in their programmes, and either their conversion into openly pro-capitalist forces, or complete disintegration as was the case with the Movement for Multiparty Democracy in Zambia and the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe, both of which arose out of the trade unions.

NUMSA’s Freedom Charter proposal could not be timelier. Since the 2014 elections, the ANC’s worst victory, the ruling party has been plunged into an even deeper crisis. The dark clouds threatening the presidency and the e-toll conflict between the Gauteng provincial and national governments is but the clearest of the fault lines dividing the ANC. The elections revealed the how much deeper the vacuum to the ANC’s left has become. The 14.3 million who stayed away would have had the option of a workers party with a genuine socialist programme confronting the ANC with a more formidable socialist opposition

At the same time it is not automatic that a new workers party will win the allegiance of the majority of the working class immediately. As Trotsky explains in *The Class, the Party and the Leadership*, “The proletariat may ‘tolerate’ for a long time a leadership that has already suffered a complete inner degeneration but has not as yet had the opportunity to express this degeneration amid great events. A great historic shock is necessary to reveal sharply the contradiction between the leadership and the class. The mightiest historical shocks are wars and revolutions. Precisely for this reason the working class is often caught unawares by war and revolution. But even in cases where the old leadership has revealed its internal corruption, the class cannot improvise immediately a new leadership, especially if it has not inherited from the previous period strong revolutionary cadres capable of utilising the collapse of the old leading party.”

The ANC lost over 200,000

votes but it still received 11.4 million. The EFF vote may have been substantial for a first time contender. Yet, despite being born in far more favourable circumstances than the Congress of the People five years earlier, it failed to better COPE’s vote.

This is also illustrated by NUMSA’s Section 77 strike on 29 March against the Youth Wage Subsidy was a valiant attempt to build unity through mass struggle. Only a number of well-meaning single issue and small social movement type organisations supported it but not the mass working class forces with which to build the UF credibly.

NUMSA is of course on the right side of history in the battle against capitalism, the ANC government and its Tripartite Alliance class collaborators. But NUMSA was a full Alliance member until December 2013, supporting Zuma for president in 2009, even if it is now his most vocal critic.

Associated with NUMSA as the future workers party would be, the most effective way to demonstrate its commitment to creating a political alternative to the ANC and to earn the trust of the masses, is by the UF engaging the ANC in battle directly, distinguishing it sharply ideologically with a clear socialist programme and setting a definite timetable for the workers party launch to contest the 2016 local government and 2019 national elections. Building the UF through a combination of debating the Freedom Charter and mass action will allow for the dialectical interplay between theory and practice in the living struggle.

The decision to build the UF instead by direct engagement with working class communities is therefore absolutely correct. The tactical turn is already vindicated by the enthusiastic response of, for example, township residents to the Kattlehong PDF/UF, in Gauteng, where problems ranging from child rape to electricity supply have been brought for resolution. Similar reports have been reported in some other provinces.

The Freedom Charter

As a contribution to the debate we will produce a thorough analysis of the Freedom Charter soon. For now, suffice it to say, we agree with NUMSA that the Freedom Charter is not a socialist programme. In its present form, it is incapable of solving the problems facing the working class and society. Seen

as a document of the increasingly discredited ANC, it may even become an obstacle for unity rather than a path towards it. From birth the Charter has been terrain contested between irreconcilable class forces – the working class and the aspirant black capitalist class. Both claimed the Charter as their

programme, but for entirely opposite purposes – the former to preserve capitalism, the latter to overthrow it. Its ideological ambiguity, reinforced by the SACP’s Stalinist influence, disarmed the organised working class in particular, leading directly to the betrayals of the last twenty years.



It is therefore absolutely necessary that socialism should be central in the Freedom Charter debate. It will be necessary to subject the Charter to a thoroughgoing socialist overhaul. Unless the debate results in the development of a genuine socialist programme, the construction of the UF will fail. The path towards a mass workers party along the NUMSA route would thus be barred. Finding another would come at yet additional cost. Revolution and counter-revolution march in tandem with each other. Every failure of the working class to advance is seized by the reaction, to consolidate its own forces whilst destabilising those of the working class.

Is the Movement for Socialism Necessary?

We believe that the decision to inject the Freedom Charter debate into the process of building the UF, calls into question the necessity for the MfS. WASP has previously raised the question as to whether there is really a need for a MfS as well as the UF. As we asked then: which forces would be in the one and not in the other? This is how reality is turning out to be. All the parties to the envisaged MfS are already participating in the Political Discussion Forums through which the UF is being constructed. What role therefore will the MfS be playing that is different from the emerging UF?

It can surely not be the intervention to separate mental and manual labour with the MfS acting as an ideological debating society for the “vanguard”, whilst the UF’s assemble the foot soldiers for mass action. Is the MfS therefore not redundant? It is highly unlikely to succeed in overcoming existing ideological and political differences. Ideological and political differences cannot simply be set aside ‘for the sake of unity’. This belittles their importance.

The United Democratic Front (UDF) of the 1980s took a federal organisational form “to unite a broadest possible spectrum of people across class and colour lines to bring together a maximum number of organisations of the people”. This meant reducing differences to the point that the UDF had an absolute “minimum programme”. As UDF historian Jeremy Seekings points out, it was guided by the dictum that “the pace of a column is not determined by its fittest and fastest soldier, but by the weakest”. The little these organisations had in common was much more important than

their considerable differences. It is precisely this that ensured the UDF’s demise, taking its own life at the insistence of the ANC, in the political equivalent of assisted suicide.

Contrary to the popular view, the challenge facing the working class is not the divisions amongst the left. The problem lies in the disunity of the struggles of the working class, within all three main theatres of struggle – service delivery, education institutions and the workplace – and across them.

With the greatest respect to all the left organisations supportive of NUMSA, not one is unequivocally committed to the abolition of capitalism, has a clear revolutionary socialist programme or a mass base. With no firm roots in the mass of the working class, the disunity in the working class struggles cannot be overcome by uniting the Left.

The ideological cohesion and programmatic unity that a workers party would need, and which a genuine socialist programme alone could achieve, would not be unattainable through the “absolute minimum programme” UDF method. Rather the priority would be ensuring nothing stands in the way of left unity. To accommodate all parties, the first ‘obstacle’ to be sacrificed is likely to be socialism – either through jettisoning it altogether or through compromise. At best such left unity would result in a diluted pink rather than a red-blooded socialism programme.

The Marxist Workers Tendency, the DSM’s forerunners, pointed out in 1986 that: “The language of ‘unity’ and of course ‘united front’ is not the special property of Marxists. But invariably what [non-Marxists] have in mind is some form of institutional ‘united front’ or permanent [ideological and political] peace pact between leaders... Revolutionaries have no interest in a ‘united front’ of words and pretty resolutions which lull the masses to sleep, believing that ‘if everyone is united, everything must be fine.’”

The UF must not become an arena for a false unity of the left based on silence over real, and important, political differences, reflecting in the final analysis the vacillation and confusion of classes other than the working class.

Unprincipled unity

A UDF-style “lowest common denominator” approach to the MfS, seeking a permanent organisational agreement to avoid such a discussion in the

name of ‘unity’, will ultimately pit itself against the genuine socialist programme the masses are striving towards. Agreement even on the Freedom Charter let alone a socialist programme would be impossible on this basis. We could end up with a situation where the tiny forces of the MfS tail would be wagging the dog of the masses behind the workers party. Instead of promoting unity the MfS would become a source of disunity.

The real lesson of the UDF is that the minimum programme meant the masses were indeed united, but behind the programme of another class! The UDF was a variant of the popular front. Normally these are fronts between working class and bourgeois formations which have betrayed the working class throughout history. The UDF was a front without the direct representatives of the bourgeoisie, but, as Trotsky described the 1930s Spanish equivalent, its shadow – the ANC. In pledging its support for the ANC’s Freedom Charter – on which the different classes allied in the liberation struggle placed different, conflicting interpretations – the UDF promoted the illusion that the ANC leadership was committed to carrying through what the masses saw as a programme for the socialist transformation of society. The masses were thus not prepared for the ANC’s subsequent betrayals.

The danger of the UDF’s popular front approach came to its full fruition in the Tripartite Alliance which formalised the subordination of the interests of the working class to those of the capitalist class. Following its unbanning, the ANC moved to the right revealing its capitalist class character – a process that began in the mid-1980s in secret discussions with the regime. This shift led to the abandonment of nationalisation – the disembowelling of the Freedom Charter – and its substitution with the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The closure of the RDP Office in 1996 and the imposition of the

neo-liberal Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy followed in short order.

The great merit of the timing of NUMSA’s proposal to build the UF on a programme is that the programme can be developed and tested out in the everyday struggle. This has the potential to bring NUMSA’s approach much closer into line with that of the Bolsheviks. It will also enable the workers party to avoid the UDF’s pitfalls.

Perspectives for the WP

The struggles in the three theatres – workplaces, communities and education institutions – must be united. Through unity in action within each arena on its own platform, programme of action and leadership, all the working class battalions in each theatre could be united under the umbrella of a mass workers party on a socialist programme. WASP has proposed creating a Socialist Trade Union Network – a version of the united front tactic – to unite workers in struggle whether they are Cosatu, Nactu, or independent union members, or unorganised, to lay the groundwork for a new socialist trade union federation – now an unavoidable necessity. Similarly, service delivery protests must be united on a common programme and banner in a country-wide socialist civic. To promote unity in the financial and academic exclusions struggles, WASP has formed a youth wing – the Socialist Youth Movement.

The October Revolution and the methods of the Bolsheviks prove that a mass workers party on a socialist programme, with a revolutionary leadership steered in the ideas of Marxism, is the historically proven method for the unification of the working class and socialist transformation of society. The UF and the workers party must be built with this objective.

IZWI SAYS:

There is no contradiction between NUMSA members enthusiastically participating in all aspects of building the UF and a workers party, but also building WASP at the same time. In fact the two are complementary. The struggle for political and ideological clarity cannot wait. It must begin now. Debate the Freedom Charter! Make full use of the WASP umbrella! With NUMSA, unite, organise and develop a cadre committed to founding the workers party on a full revolutionary socialist programme.