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Unions and the UDF

A look back at the lessons of the 1980s

By Devan Pillay

Professor Devan Pillay is a former political prisoner who attended the meeting in January 1983 that announced the need for a united front against apartheid, and the subsequent launch of the UDF in Cape Town in August that year. He played an active role in the UDF, both as a member of its affiliate, the Azanian Students Organisation, and in the UDF Woodstock area committee. After completing his PhD, Pillay went on to work for the National Union of Mineworkers in the 1990s. Many of the insights presented in this article are derived from these experiences. He is now an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand.

This article traces back to the roots of the tension between the democratic-socialist future promised by the UDF in the 1980s and the independent unions who warned of the dangers of nationalist politics where liberation elites take command instead of the working class. In this article DEVAN PILLAY considers the lessons for today of the 1980s heightened political conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The African National Congress (ANC), in alliance with the SA Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu), has ruled South Africa since the birth of democracy in 1994. However, while it has achieved some success in addressing the worst aspects of apartheid, by creating a democratic constitutional order which enshrines essential rights and freedoms for all South Africans, it has also presided over the increasing corruption of the state and society, with widespread criminality and a severe decline in law and order. High unemployment, poverty and inequality have not been meaningfully addressed, and the collapse of the state at local and provincial levels, as well as in key parastatals such as Eskom, has made meaningful transformation even further out of reach.

Indeed, despite the rhetoric of a "national democratic revolution", few believe that the ruling elites, along with their private sector counterparts, have any interest in meaningful socio-economic transformation. Black economic empowerment, originally a radical concept aimed at uplifting the working class majority, was captured by corporate capital and reduced to black economic *enrichment* for a few well-connected cadres.

It is in this context that many activists from the 1980s look fondly back to the heady days of the unions and the United Democratic Front (UDF), when the promise of a substantive democratic-socialist future permeated the anti-apartheid struggle.

Indeed, the independent unions at that time warned of the perils of nationalist politics, where liberation elites take over the reins of struggle from the working class, and lead it down the blind alleys of patronage and personal enrichment.

This had been the story of most national liberation struggles, where the organised working class did not play an independent and leading role. When the UDF urged the independent unions to join the umbrella body after it was formed in 1983, the unions demurred, arguing that whilst they could be part of joint campaigns against the apartheid state, they preferred to remain independent.

Only a few "community" unions, formed by ANC-SACP cadres and ideologically aligned to the exiled South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), joined the UDF. All these unions, along with others such as the rapidly growing National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), came together to form Cosatu in 1985. It made a dramatic impact on society, and ➤➤

when the UDF was effectively banned in 1987, Cosatu effectively led the struggle against racial capitalism.

This article looks back at the relationship between the unions and the UDF during the early 1980s, and asks what lessons can we learn from that critical period of our history? In order to understand that period, it is necessary to delve into the earlier history of working class struggle, and its role in the shaping of modern South Africa.

EARLY TRADE UNIONS AND THE SHAPING OF MODERN SOUTH AFRICA

From the late 19th century, as mining and industrial capitalism grew in South Africa, trade unions and other social movements emerged, in black and white communities. Two pivotal moments in our labour history had dramatic political impacts, altering the trajectory of South Africa's political economy. The first was the 1922 white mineworkers' strike and the second the 1946 black mineworkers' strike.

In 1922, during a period of economic recession, white mineworkers went on strike to protest against mine owners' attempts to replace unskilled white labour with cheaper black labour. The strike was supported by the newly formed Communist Party of SA (CPSA), which at that time erroneously thought that white workers would be at the "vanguard" of the working class struggle against capitalism, and urged the unity of black and white workers. However, the racism of most white workers, who fought under the banner *Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa!*, disabused the CPSA of this notion, and they thereafter turned their attention to the organisation of black workers (Simons and Simons, 1985; Lodge, 2021).

While violently suppressed by the Smuts government (led by the mine-owner friendly South African Party) the 1922 strike altered the course of history by ushering in the Pact government of 1924, a coalition of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party and the Labour Party. The Pact government, led by Barry Hertzog as Prime Minister, went on to intensify policies favouring white labour, laying the basis for the much harsher policies of apartheid after 1948.

As the economy grew rapidly along the trajectory of a minerals-energy complex, which included an expanding manufacturing sector, the party of Hertzog merged with that of Smuts to form the United South African National Party (or United Party) in 1938. Smuts became prime minister in 1939, after Hertzog was ousted for opposing South Africa's entry into the Second World War as an ally of Great Britain. In the meantime, the more extreme Afrikaner nationalists under DF Malan split away to form the Purified National Party, which later merged with Hertzog's National Party to form the Reunited National Party in 1940, which became the official opposition (Simpson, 2021).

During this period trade union organisation amongst black workers burgeoned. While black mineworkers did organise themselves and went on strike before 1922, it was the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), led by dockworker Clements Kadalie, which spread like wildfire in the 1920s, addressing economic exploitation as well as wider socio-political oppression. However, its "populist" character, which relied on charismatic leaders and a weak organisational base, saw it peter out by the end of the decade.

Much more rooted trade unions emerged in the 1930s, formed by the CPSA and smaller Trotskyist groups. While most of them were in the manufacturing and services sectors that grew rapidly in Johannesburg and other urban centres, the African Mineworkers Union (AMWU) was perhaps the most significant. Led by ANC and CPSA leader JB Marks, and an affiliate of the CPSA-dominated Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU), mineworkers were held back from going on strike during the war.

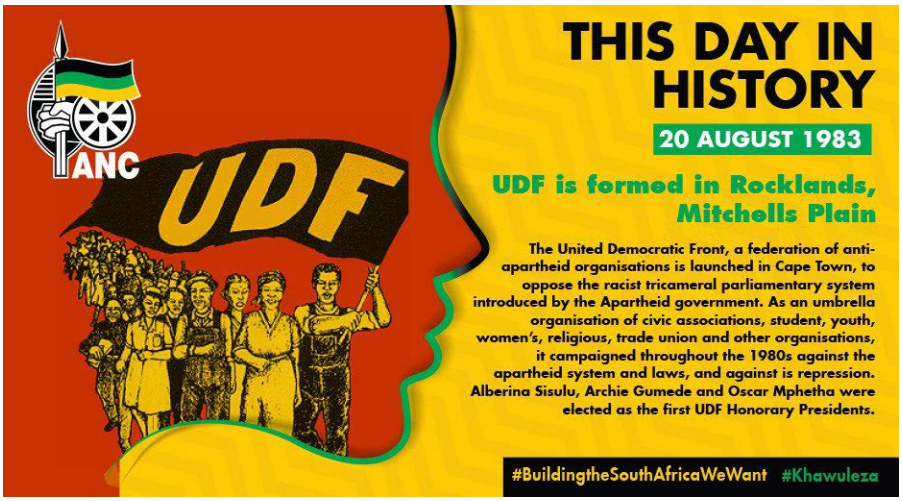
After the Soviet Union joined the war following Nazi Germany's invasion of that country, the CPSA dutifully switched from opposing the war to becoming enthusiastic supporters of the alliance against fascism. In addition, promises were made by the Smuts government that, in exchange for industrial peace, various rights and freedoms would be granted after the war.

By 1946, after the war ended, it became clear that the Smuts government was not going to honour its commitments. A massive strike of mineworkers was preceded by a broad-based passive resistance campaign against renewed attempts to discriminate against people of Indian origin. The violent suppression of both campaigns served to radicalise the ANC and the Natal and Transvaal Indian congresses, leading to the formation of the Doctors Pact between the leaders AB Xuma, Yusuf Dadoo and Monty Naicker in 1947 (Simpson, 2021).

Like the 1922 white mineworkers strike, the 1946 strike had a dramatic impact on white politics. Along with the anti-British sentiment provoked by the war, the National Party invoked fears of a communist threat, and a threat to the cheap labour regime that underpinned the economy. While the United Party, representing predominantly English mine owners and related manufacturing interests, promised to contain the threat of rising black political aspirations, the Nationalists promised far more drastic policies, in the form of apartheid. They narrowly won the election of 1948, and ushered in a brutal period of apartheid repression, beginning with the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, which outlawed the CPSA, driving it underground, where it re-emerged as the SACP.

The "unity of the oppressed", forged in the 1940s through mass struggles, gathered steam in the 1950s. Unions re-grouped after a period of intense repression, and formed SACTU, with the SACP playing a significant underground

> **Black economic empowerment … was captured by corporate capital and reduced to black economic *enrichment* for a few well-connected cadres.**



role. The party was also secretly active in legal groups such as the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the (white) Congress of Democrats, the Coloured People's Congress and the Federation of SA Women. They all came together in the Congress Alliance of 1955, which adopted the broadly "social-democratic" Freedom Charter as its ideological reference point.

Others who were part of the initial attempt to forge a Non-European Unity Front in the late 1930s remained outside this configuration, and the ANC itself split in 1959, when Africanists who objected to the "multiracial" Freedom Charter and the influence of white communists, formed the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Both the ANC and PAC were banned after the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 and Sactu went underground. Key labour leaders left the country to become part of the military wing of the ANC-SACP, Umkhonto we Sizwe, which made legal union organising amongst black workers a very dangerous undertaking during the 1960s.

This was all to change with the 1973 Durban strikes amongst textile workers, which rapidly spread to other parts of the country.

RACE, CLASS AND THE REVIVAL OF STRUGGLE IN THE 1970s

Before the re-emergence of black trade unions in the 1970s, the student movement filled the vacuum left by the banning of the main liberation movements. Black consciousness initially emerged as a bridge between the ANC and the PAC, but soon evolved its own identity, with an ideological discourse borrowed from the black American struggle against racism. On the one hand, they broadened their outlook beyond that of a narrow Africanism, by including all those who suffered from apartheid oppression (ie "black" included those classified as coloured and Indian by the apartheid regime). On the other hand, while black consciousness had an express orientation towards a non-racial future, their discourse and practice excluded white people from their ambit of struggle. Those sympathetic to the anti-apartheid struggle were encouraged to work within white communities, to change attitudes there.

Steve Biko, a key leader of the black consciousness-aligned SA Student Organisation (Saso), was however also a close friend of Rick Turner, a white Marxist lecturer associated with the Wages Commission, a student project that attracted the left wing of white student politics at that time (McQueen, 2018). They rejected the notion that their politics should be confined to the white community (Moss, 2014). Biko and Turner, both later killed by apartheid forces, had a major impact on the politics of the 1970s, in different ways. They respectively represented two sides of the dialectic between race and class, a subject they engaged in intense debate amongst themselves in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Initially, the black consciousness emphasis was on *students* as the vanguard of the struggle against apartheid. Indeed, the student movement did play a critical role in challenging the apartheid regime, culminating in the June 1976 uprising. However, prior to that, the country was shaken by the massive 1973 strike wave, and the Wages Commissions formed the basis of workers' advice offices, which were embryos of future trade union organisation in the 1970s (Friedman, 1987). They were inspired by Turner's radical participatory-democratic ideas, which placed the *working class* in the leading role in the struggle against both apartheid and capitalism.

Turner's ideas were contained in the 1972 publication *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South* ➤➤

Africa, which argued for "The Necessity of Utopian Thinking" (Turner, 1972). It's humanist Marxism was non-dogmatic and inclusive, and departed from the top-down vanguardism of the SACP in exile, which followed the twists and turns of the Soviet Union. Turner encouraged trade union independence but socio-political engagement, what later became known as social movement unionism (Webster, 1994) – a departure from the narrower political unionism of Sactu in exile, which subordinated unions to the SACP and ANC.

Turner had a wide impact, and encouraged new layers of students to become part of the working class struggle, by building democratic trade unions. Indeed, the black consciousness movement itself began shifting its position as the decade progressed, such that it recognised the need to see the struggle as an intertwined connection between racial oppression and working class exploitation. This was also influenced by the underground SACP and "third world" or black Marxism. While Turner (1972), with much foresight, did highlight issues around environmental sustainability, the environment – and gender issues – were marginalised at that time.

Although worker organising was hampered by state and employer repression, and the student uprising was crushed, it ushered in an era of "reform apartheid" under the leadership of PW Botha and his "total strategy" – which was designed to control and co-opt the anti-apartheid resistance. Instead, legal space was widened for union organising and anti-apartheid mobilisation, and unions and civic groups mushroomed from the late 1970s.

Civic associations such as the Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (Cahac) and the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Association (Pebco) emerged; the student movement began to regroup, whereby the banned Saso was replaced by Azaso; alternative anti-apartheid community newspapers appeared; and industrial action and union-community alliances re-emerged with dramatic success.

UNIONS AND COMMUNITIES IN THE 1980s

Most of the labour movements that emerged in the aftermath of the 1973 strikes were by and large influenced by Turner's New Left Marxism that promoted participatory democracy, and "working class leadership" of the struggle against racial capitalism (see Keniston, 2010 and 2013). In this conception, trade unions, as a critical component of the organised working class, were rooted in strong shop-floor democratic organisation. These unions became part of the Federation of SA Trade Unions (Fosatu) in 1979, and along with the Western Cape-based General Workers Union (GWU) and the Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU), they focused more on what Burawoy (1985) called "production politics" – an emphasis on workplace issues, in the first instance, in order to build democratic workplace organisation.

Although the exiled ANC, SACP and Sactu were initially hostile towards the new unions that emerged during the 1970s, there were strong currents of support for the independent union movement amongst new layers of activists, particularly during the 1979-81 period, when students and community groups enthusiastically promoted consumer boycotts of Fattis and Monis pasta, Wilson Rowntree sweets and red meat in support of striking unions. Students played a major role by using their networks (and access to university printing presses) to make these Cape Town-based strikes and consumer boycotts a national campaign.

Unlike the Fosatu unions, the FCWU and GWU in Cape Town initially had strong links with community groups that would later become part of the UDF. The FCWU was a Sactu affiliate before the latter was driven underground, and both unions employed activists aligned to the Congress tradition (Friedman, 1987; Pillay, 1989).

The consumer boycott campaign in support of the FCWU strike at Fattis and Monis mobilised a wide range of community organisations in the Western Cape and nationally. This largely successful display of union-community collaboration encouraged the GWU (then known as the Western Province GWU) to elicit community support for its strike against meat employers the following year, which resulted in a national boycott of red meat. Both these watershed consumer boycotts raised issues of vital concern: who leads the struggle against apartheid (or racial capitalism) – workers or political activists?

This issue arose because, while unions welcomed community support, they felt that the community activists, who derived their mandate from an elite "vanguard", could move at a faster pace than the democratic unions, which had more elaborate decision-making processes. Community activists, on the other hand, felt that the unions were reluctant to take the next step and forge a more elaborate popular-democratic politics, in which the organised working class could play a leading role (see Pillay, 1989).

The community or political unions that emerged during this period (under the influence of the ANC and SACP in exile) placed emphasis on state-power politics. They accused the more cautious unions of being "economistic" or "workerist" (ie narrowly workplace centred). In response, a seminal speech by Fosatu's Joe Foster in 1982 declared that the federation was in fact interested in engaging with state-power politics, but on their own terms, and independently.

They even suggested the possibility of forming a workers' party, which would in effect become an alternative to the SACP (Foster, 1982; Pillay 1989). Fosatu (as well as the FCWU and GWU) accused the political unions (and by

extension the underground SACP) of being "populist" – namely deferring to the nationalist politics of the ANC, relying on charismatic leaders with weak organisational structures, and relegating working class issues to the margins of the struggle. The most notable example was the South African Allied Workers Unions (SAAWU) which, like the ICU in the 1920s, grew rapidly, but virtually collapsed when their leaders were detained (Friedman, 1987; Baskin, 1991).

It is against this backdrop that the UDF was formed in 1983.

THE RISE OF THE UDF

The importance of the student movement lay not only in the support it gave at the time to the workers' struggle, but also in the creation of activists who would go on to set up and run a range of unions and community organisations. If an earlier generation of students (inspired by independent Marxism) were pivotal in the formation of Fosatu and the GWU/FCWU, a new generation in the early 1980s, inspired more by the SACP's Soviet Marxism (or a combination of both), were directly involved in the formation of overtly political unions. During the early 1980s student publications such as *SASPU National* gave uncritical support to the political unions, as did community papers run by former students, such as *Grassroots* in Cape Town. These students, many of whom came from a black consciousness background, played a major role in the formation of "non-racial" civic and community organisations, that came together to form the UDF.[1]

For a period before the launch of the UDF, Azaso, the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) and the high school-based Congress of South African Students (Cosas) took the lead in promoting the ANC, and were at the forefront of the Release Mandela Campaign and the 1981 Anti-Republic Day campaign.

The UDF began as an umbrella body of a wide range of political, community and labour organisations, and was careful not to narrow its ideological framing. It only finally adopted the Freedom Charter in 1987 (Seekings, 2000; Desai and Vahed, 2021). However, key affiliates and individuals were strongly aligned to the Congress movement, and this was partly the reason why the major democratic unions declined to join the UDF, arguing that their membership had diverse political views. The unions were also more focused on forging trade union unity at that time (Friedman, 1987).

The Congress movement itself had different ideological emphases. Whilst those more closely tied to the "populist" politics of the ANC-SACP tended to be hostile towards the independent unions, others embraced a more "popular-democratic" approach (see Hall, 1980) that recognised "working class leadership" of the popular struggle. They were keen to minimise the differences and maximise the points of commonality between the unions and the Congress organisations (see Saul, 1986).

Similarly, while some independent unions were cautious about state-power politics, others were less cautious, but sought an appropriate way to do so without compromising union independence. These unions often contained underground ANC operatives, such as Jay Naidoo, who were oriented towards a popular-democratic approach. Naidoo eventually became general secretary of Cosatu at its formation in 1985 – a combination of the independent unions and the UDF unions (Naidoo, 2010).

Underlying the workerism-populism debate was a common belief amongst Marxists on both sides in the desirability of a loosely-defined "socialism", as an alternative to racial capitalism (or, as the SACP styled it, colonialism-of-a-special-type).[2] The key strategic question was whether the anti-apartheid struggle should take on an overtly anti-capitalist form (and be led by the trade union movement and/or an independent workers' party), or whether the focus should be on attacking white domination as a unifying factor (as long as "the working class" led the struggle).

The key was what was meant by "working class leadership". For the unions and some in the UDF, working class leadership meant both the elevation of people from working class backgrounds into leadership positions, as well as promoting socialist ideas. For the SACP, working class leadership resided in the Leninist notion of a vanguard party, led by professional revolutionaries. That is, the SACP embodied working class leadership – which for critics meant tailing behind the "populism" of the ANC, whose discourse and practice, as with early black consciousness, was pivoted around a non-class, undifferentiated struggle against apartheid. They either did not recognise class and other divisions amongst the oppressed (such as gender), or they downplayed their significance to the point of extinction (see for example Toussaint, 1983; Isizwe, 1986, 1987a and 1987b; Leggasick, 2007; Friedman, 1987).

As mentioned previously, both "populism" and "workerism" were counterposed to a "popular-democratic" emphasis that acknowledged class and gender differences, as well as the necessity to forge broad alliances of anti-apartheid forces. In this conception, "working class leadership" went beyond the crude substitutionism of the SACP at the time. It grappled with the complexities of building a worker leadership from the ranks of the working class, which would strive to reflect the diversity of the mass movement.

Such a leadership could only be built, according to this perspective, if there was maximum democracy and accountability within organisations, as well as a clear working class or socialist consciousness – ie an understanding of the capitalist essence of apartheid, and ➤➤

the need to build a democratic socialist alternative (Pillay, 1989 and 1996).

Whatever the ideological discourses coming out of the various camps, their organisational practices were what counted. For the unions, the imperatives of workplace organisation propelled them towards a preoccupation with narrow economistic concerns, which were necessary for their survival. They therefore often found it difficult to support community campaigns (which the community organisations in Cape Town expected, after their support for the consumer boycotts).

On the other hand, the imperatives of state-power politics compelled community and political groups to match the pace of the state, which often meant being more centrally organised and more voluntaristic. They therefore became impatient with the unions' slower consultative processes, and the unions felt "bullied" into making quick decisions in support of their campaigns. Relations reached a low point after the death in detention of FCWU unionist Neil Aggett in 1982, and the "hi-jacking" of his funeral by the ANC, thereby undermining the union (see Theron, 2016 and Naidoo, 2012).

Despite Fosatu deciding not to join the UDF, the 1984 Vaal uprisings (Rueedi, 2021) saw unprecedented unity between unions and the UDF. The formation of Cosatu in 1985, bringing together the so-called "populist" and "workerist" unions, paved the way for a more constructive relationship between the union movement and other social movements.

However, unionists from the "workerist" camp remained concerned about union independence, and the manner in which Jay Naidoo consulted with the ANC and SACP in exile, without a mandate from the federation (Copelyn, 2016). Although the first two years of Cosatu's existence were characterised by bitter divisions between "workerists" and "populists", by 1987 a "strategic compromise" was forged (Lewis, 1988). In many ways, a "popular-democratic" approach was adopted by Cosatu, which went on to adopt the Freedom Charter as a "stepping stone towards socialism" (Carrim, 1987).

The UDF in the meantime was under severe attack by the state, and by 1988 it was effectively banned from operating. The Mass Democratic Movement, a looser coalition of anti-apartheid forces, including the unions, emerged to take its place. This time, however, the unions, through Cosatu, played a *leading role* in the anti-apartheid struggle.

This was partly by default, in that community activists were driven underground and their organisations were unable to operate effectively (Seekings, 2000). Cosatu, despite itself being under concerted state pressure, led the campaign against violence, the civil disobedience campaign and the Free Mandela Campaign. Leading unionists such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Jay Naidoo, Sydney Mufamadi and others took on a high political profile (Baskin, 1991).

Momentum was building inside the country (with increasing support from outside, including sanctions), such that the apartheid regime, now led by FW de Klerk, saw the writing on the wall, and sought a political settlement. The ANC and SACP were unbanned in 1990, and the way was paved for the first democratic elections in 1994.

However, "working class leadership" of the struggle proved to be a mirage, and by 1990 Cosatu was firmly within the embrace of the ANC and SACP (against the warnings of what became minority voices in the unions by that stage). Leading Cosatu unionists made public announcements that they had been members of the SACP for a number of years (Pillay, 1990), underlining the manner in which the party was able to out-manoeuvre their opponents from the mid-1980s onwards. Eventually, many critics of the ANC-SACP decided that if they could not beat them, they should join them – in parliament, government and business. This became known as the "brain drain', as the union movement lost many of its most innovative thinkers (Buhlungu, 2010).

The rest, as they say, is history.

CONCLUSION

The UDF decided to disband in 1991, in deference to the ANC, who immediately took over the leadership of the resistance movement upon its return from exile. The UDF's women's and youth affiliates became part of the ANC Women's League and Youth League, and an umbrella body, the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO), was formed to coordinate the civic associations across the country, with limited effect.

What the unions had warned about during the 1970s and 80s, namely the subordination of the working class to nationalist elites, became a reality – with many of those previously critical union voices complicit in the demise of a democratic socialist project.

The second largest Cosatu affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), did still try to argue for an independent workers' party, but when it lost that debate in 1993 it too succumbed, and immersed itself into the politics of the SACP and ANC. More recently, Numsa finally formed its own party, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP), which performed dismally in the 2019 elections. The SRWP was based on outdated 20th century Marxist-Leninism, which even the SACP had discarded. This was a major departure from the more democratic, humanist Marxism of its founders in the 1970s.

Clearly, South Africa needs a new politics of the Left that can capture the imagination of a broad range of disaffected people who are alienated from both the ANC-SACP and the range of opposition parties on offer (from the liberal DA to the racial populist EFF). Any new formation has to take seriously the traditional race and class questions, as well as issues of patriarchy and the environmental crisis, in particular

> **… when the UDF was effectively banned in 1987, Cosatu effectively led the struggle against racial capitalism.**

climate change. Such a politics needs to be firmly grounded in participatory-democratic principles, which were forged in the 1980s, both within the unions and within the UDF.

Democratic ecosocialism, anyone?



Source: Rashid Lombard Archive

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ENDNOTE

1 Azaso is one notable example of a black consciousness organisation that shifted to the politics of the Congress movement. While it retained its blacks-only membership status, it worked very closely with the predominantly white Nusas. Those that remained within the black consciousness fold, as well as independent Trotskyist groups (with a strong presence in the Western Cape), formed the National Forum (NF). Unlike the NF, the UDF grew rapidly, and gained a mass following throughout the country.

2 The SACP had strong affinities to the Soviet Union, and looked to it as their model of "socialism". However, other thinkers in the SACP, such as Harold Wolpe and Ruth First, were disillusioned with the Soviet Union and the dogmatic, schematic Marxism it produced, and argued for a more democratic form of socialism. They were marginalised within the SACP, but did attract support amongst activists inside the country, who were inspired by this version of ANC-SACP politics. Wolpe had some influence on the thinking of SACP general secretary Joe Slovo, which contributed to his explosive 1989 SACP discussion paper *Has Socialism Failed?*, that criticised the vanguardist politics of the Soviet Union and SACP practice that derived from that (see Slovo, 1990) NA