



# Role of Trade Unions in the South African Revolution

**A Reader, African Communist, Third Quarter 1980**

Last year a dispute broke out between a small faction in SACTU and the leadership which led to the sacking of the editor of *Workers' Unity* and his suspension, together with four of his supporters, from the ranks of the ANC in London. This article is not concerned with the actual activities and mode of operation of the five people concerned, which is being or has been dealt with by SACTU and the ANC. What is discussed in my article, however, is the analysis of the role of the trade union movement in the South African revolutionary struggle which is put forward in a pamphlet *The Workers' Movement* and SACTU circulated by the five dissidents. In my view the policies set out in this pamphlet are erroneous and fun counter to the policies of the liberation movement which the five claim to be supporting but are in fact undermining.

The analysis in the pamphlet represents an attempt to apply to the South African struggle a particular economic and "workerist" approach which has frequently appeared, in different forms, in the revolutionary movement at various times and in different countries. It is thus a tendency which is deep-rooted and has great resilience and this makes it important that we should not rest content with disciplinary action, but that we should try to understand the incorrect theory which underlies the analysis.

The main document in the pamphlet, the memorandum submitted to the NEC of SACTU by the then editor of Workers' Unity Petersen; begins with a question:

*"When it comes to our tasks at home, a strange paralysis still grips SACTU. What is the root cause of it?" (p. 17)*

The answer is given immediately:

*"I would like to submit for the consideration of the NEG that the root cause is political. We are affected by a lack of clarity about SACTU's role and future. There are deep differences of opinion within our ranks on the importance of trade union work; on the relationship between the workers' movement and the struggle of all the oppressed; on the relationship between national liberation, democracy and socialism; on SACTU's position in relation to armed struggle," (p, 17)*

In short, the issue posed is the relationship between the trade union movement (or, at least, the revolutionary wing of that movement) and the revolutionary and national liberation struggle in the specific conditions in South Africa.

The document approaches the question, firstly, through a discussion of the specific relationship between the economic and political struggles in South Africa, secondly, through an analysis of the relationship between the armed struggle, on the one hand, and the trade union and political struggles on the other and, thirdly, through a particular, implied, conception of the relationship of SACTU to the workers' movement. The end result of the analysis, as we shall see, is the total collapse of the entire political and armed struggle of the popular masses into the trade union movement and the abandonment of any conception of an alliance in the revolutionary struggle between the working class and the 'rural poor' together, under the appropriate conditions, with the petty bourgeoisie.

### **The Relationship between the Economic and Political Struggle in South Africa**

According to the document, SACTU's role in the struggle is determined by the specific character of capitalist exploitation and oppression in South Africa.

The starting point of the analysis is the contention that in South Africa the link between the economic and political struggle is 'direct and obvious'. The point is familiar to us and has long been accepted by our movement even if the precise nature of the link has not been elaborated. The point is that not only are the division of labour, wage rates, industrial organization etc structured on the basis of racial criteria but also the state tends to enter immediately into industrial conflicts involving black

workers. As the document correctly states: "Every serious economic clash in South Africa confronts the black workers with the murderous state power of the enemy . . ." (p. 32)

It follows from this that the fundamental economic and political demands of the people cannot be achieved on the basis of the capitalist order in South Africa. In this respect, although there are differences in formulation and emphasis, the document does not stray too far from the position of our movement as expressed, for example, in the Freedom Charter and in the Programme of Action. Thus, to quote two typical passages from the document:

*"National liberation and democracy cannot be secured by the black workers of South Africa on the basis of capitalism I but only through the liquidation of capitalism and the building of socialism". (p. 19)*

And again:

*"To establish genuine democratic people's power in South Africa, which can only be secured on the foundation of workers' power, means to smash the South African state -not merely as an Apartheid state, but equally as the capitalist state which it essentially is." (p. 21)*

Thus national liberation can only be achieved on the basis of the destruction of the political and economic foundations of the apartheid system. But what organizations will lead this overall political struggle, by what forms of struggle and on the basis of which social classes? It is in the answer to these questions that both the incorrect analysis in the document and the strategy it is intended to support, are revealed.

Firstly, it is necessary to point to "an *apparent* confusion in the document – apparent because, as will be seen, it is a confusion which serves an important purpose. It was shown above that the document argues that no fundamental changes can be achieved in South Africa without overthrowing apartheid and capitalism. But there is an additional argument which the document derives directly from the above that is, the contention that "no substantial or lasting concessions" (p. 18), even though they fall far short of amounting to fundamental changes, in the spheres of wages, trade union rights, pass laws and "migrant labour can be won from the apartheid regime. The document states:

*'We have explained again and again that even the most basic demands of the workers can only be secured through the victory of the struggle to smash apartheid and the profit system.'* (p. 19)

And furthermore, "The struggle for democracy has exactly the same implications". (p. 19)

Now it is true that the document does purport to recognize that there is a specifically trade union arena of struggle (see p. 23 -"it concentrates its activities in a definite field of struggle") and furthermore, that the trade union must "strive to mobilize and organise the workers through day to day struggles for concessions and reforms..." (p. 26-27). However, the purpose of those struggles is to demonstrate to the workers that nothing can be won short of the revolution:

*"... the trade union represents for the workers weapons which they can use to advance their economic struggle and defend their gains. But as we have seen, not one of the vital material needs of the working class ... can be secured on the basis of capitalism. Every partial gain by the workers in the economic struggle is immediately placed in jeopardy and sooner or later stolen back again by the employers and their apartheid state. The economic struggle is thus doomed to frustration unless it is linked to the revolutionary struggle for state power ... (p. 26)*

The idea that every gain won by the working class is merely absorbed by capital to its own advantage is an old one; it is an idea which totally underestimates the gains in many spheres made by the working class (political and trade union rights etc) in different countries.

But if this argument is, nonetheless, correct, then, until the revolution succeeds, all apparent gains will be frustrated sooner or later. What becomes vital then is that the working class should not as a result of its failure to win permanent concessions, itself become "frustrated", demoralised and passive. Since the revolutionary struggle is protracted, and gains, therefore, subject to frustration, how is the revolutionary struggle to be advanced? According to the document merely, it seems, by linking the immediate demands "to the revolutionary struggle for state power".

It is, of course, correct to link immediate with revolutionary demands in order to avoid a reformist position. But making such a linkage is quite obviously not enough. The guarantee against depression of the revolutionary struggle and the participation of the masses rests on the ability of the working class and revolutionary organizations to mobilize the masses, by their own struggles, to win concessions, to resist the erosion of gains and to win new gains and concessions. The mobilization of the masses and their success in winning concessions as the outcome of struggle is of fundamental importance in overcoming frustration and developing self consciousness in the struggle.

Quite the opposite position is argued in the document: in the view of the, document the revolutionary struggle is furthered by ensuring that the so-called day to day demands which are put forward must be formulated so as to guarantee that the struggle *will fail to achieve them*. That is, frustration of the workers' struggle, failure to win their immediate demands is the proposed path to revolutionary confidence and intensification of the struggle. Thus:

*"We have to bring out in practice ... the total incapacity of the system in South Africa (or any reforms within the system) to provide a decent life for the working people." (36) "For example, our wage demand ..... sets the minimum wage at an entirely reasonable level of R50 a week for all workers ... This is impossible to achieve while capitalism has its stranglehold on the development of the South African economy". (p. 37)*

It must be stressed that what is in issue here is not the necessity of a revolutionary trade union movement linking immediate demands with the revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the regime. What is at issue is the insistence by the document that the revolutionary trade union movement must advance *general revolutionary demands* and only those specific demands which cannot be met except as the outcome of a successful revolutionary transformation of the society. That is, the trade union movement is conceived of as standing in the same relationship to state power as, for example, MK does – that is, in direct and total opposition unmediated by the possibility of intermediate demands around which the struggle can be conducted.

But, except in the moment of revolutionary crisis the trade union" movement like the political movement (although in different ways) is obliged to conduct the struggle around specific demands.

Thus despite the reference to the trade union field, the document sees the struggle of the trade unions in a way which fails completely to differentiate it from and yet link it to the general political struggle. This is clearly reflected in a number of passages in the document in which the organizational role of SACTU is defined in a general way so as simply to identify, it as a general revolutionary organization. Thus, for example,

*"SACTU is a trade union organization but it is compelled nonetheless to address itself to all the basic, political questions of the South African revolution".*

and the "impossibility" of separating the national liberation and socialist aims of the movement means that for SACTU

*"This understanding must be the cornerstone of SACTU's approach to the revolution."*

This "overpoliticization" of the trade union sphere leads above all to the obliteration of the specific role of the revolutionary trade union movement and gives to SACTU a general, revolutionary political function. This conclusion is reinforced by the document's conception of the armed struggle which, together with its analysis of the relationship of SACTU to the worker's movement leads, in fact, to the substitution of SACTU for other, political organizations.

### **The Trade Union Movement and the Armed Struggle**

Thus far we have shown that the document, starting from the correct principle that in South Africa there is a particularly close relationship between the economic (trade union) struggle and the political struggle, then draws the quite erroneous conclusion that this requires a *fusion* of the revolutionary trade union movement and the "workers' movement" such that the entire political struggle of the workers becomes submerged in the trade union movement. Now the argument is taken further: from an argument that the armed struggle must not be separated from the political struggle, the conclusion necessarily seems to be that the organization of the armed struggle and that of the trade union movement must be fused into the latter. This emerges in the following way:

The document first of all makes the general point that

*"The struggle for the seizure of state power takes many forms and many courses linked together, but at the decisive point that struggle can only be won by defeating the armed force of the state with the revolutionary armed force of the masses." (p. 22)*

In South Africa the futility of not linking the armed to other forms of struggle is demonstrated by the facts of Sharpeville and its aftermath and, indeed, the "... most advanced and politically conscious layers of the working class have never counterposed *armed struggle* to *mass struggle*, as if they were different things." (p 22)

The critical importance of the armed struggle notwithstanding, that struggle must be subordinated to the politics of the mass struggle:

*"A revolutionary strategy directed towards armed insurrection – the only genuinely revolutionary strategy possible in South Africa – requires at every stage that clear priority must be given to building organizations of mass struggle." (p. 22)*

And this means

*"... that armed struggle must not be separated from mass struggle but must be fused with the development of the mass movement at every stage. It means*

*that politics – the politics of mass struggle – must at every point command the gun.” (p. 23)*

Now, within this general approach how are we to understand the *fusion* of the armed struggle with SACTU according to the analysis advanced in the document?

Firstly, as in the case of all struggles of the "mass movement", the role of the armed struggle should be in the form of organized self-defence:

*"... armed action on our side should in its early stages have mainly the character of organized self-defence by the mass movement against the terror tactics of the state. It means armed defence in favourable circumstances, of strikes, demonstrations, 'squatter' camps and schools; against police raids, pass arrests, forced removals and so forth.” (p. 23)*

The question arises, however of how and under what organizational form this self defence is to be organized? In our movement it has been recognized that while the armed movement must be under the command of the political, nonetheless, it requires its own, separate form of organization. The document departs from this position in the most radical way. Not only is there absolutely no discussion in the document about the question of the separate organization of the armed wing of the movement and hence of the way in which that wing might be brought into relationship with the trade union struggle, but, perhaps, more importantly, the document absorbs the armed struggle into SACTU which is now set up as in command of the armed struggle. This can be shown through a series of quotations from the document:

*"... The most advanced and politically conscious layers of the working class have never counterposed armed struggle to mass struggle, as if they were different things. For them and for us, it is a question of the organization, mobilization and arming of the mass of the people, headed by the organized workers, towards the eventual armed insurrection and seizure of state power." (p. 22)*

This arming and organizing of the workers is, thus a function of SACTU, and what is more is a task which belongs to the activists of SACTU who have been militarily trained; that is our militarily trained cadres find their organizational base not in armed units but in the ranks of SACTU. A revolutionary strategy aimed at armed insurrection

*"...means the fullest participation of militarily trained revolutionaries in the day-to-day struggles of the people as political cadres first and foremost, involved in the mobilising, educating, training and arming of the mass movement."(p. 23)*

## **SACTU and the Workers' Movement**

The title of the pamphlet is SACTU and the Workers' Movement and this separation is repeated in many different parts of the document. The implication, of course, is that the workers' movement and SACTU are, in some sense, separate entities and that SACTU cannot be conceived of as incorporating the whole of the workers' struggle into itself.

It has already been shown, however, that the document actually argues for the "fusion" of the armed struggle and the workers' political struggle and organization fully into SACTU. This position is reinforced in a different way.

Firstly, no other organizational forms of the mass movement are discussed at all – the ANC rates one mention (an affirmation of the ANC-SACTU alliance), MK is not mentioned at all and nor is the Communist Party. And this, in a document purporting to analyse the role of the revolutionary trade union movement not merely in relation to specific demands for wages etc but in relation to the overall political and armed struggle to overthrow apartheid and capitalism in South Africa! The inescapable conclusion is that for the authors of the document SACTU is the workers' movement or, at the very least, the sole leading force of that movement:

*"It is an elementary duty of revolutionaries to make work in the trade union movement in South Africa one of the top priorities of the whole struggle. This work is indispensable if we are to find a road to the mass of the workers, to unite them in concrete struggles towards armed self-defence and the eventual forcible seizure of power." (p. 31)*

That is, the whole of the workers' movement, its revolutionary role, its role as the factor of political organization and unity of the whole working class is condensed into the sole bearer of the working class struggle – SACTU.

In a certain sense, the exaggeration of the role of SACTU can be related to the fact that the authors of the pamphlet held positions within SACTU which thus appeared to provide an organizational base from which their line could be propagated. It is necessary, however, to go beyond that and to explain why SACTU could be conceived of by them to fulfil the role they wished to assign to it. The answer lies in their economistic conception of the political struggle and a related underestimation of the importance of class alliances in the struggle.

Implicit in, and underlying the entire document, is the "workerist" conception that the political struggle grows directly out of the immediate struggles at the point of production. For them, the wage struggle leads directly to the revolutionary struggle

for the overthrow of apartheid and capitalism. It is not possible here to discuss this issue at any length. It is clear, however, that despite the direct intrusion of the political into the economic, there are structural conditions which tend to limit the horizons of the trade union struggle and it is quite impossible to reduce the complexities of the general revolutionary political struggle to the trade union struggle.

For one thing, the revolutionary struggle is never fought by the working class alone even though that class is the foundation of the struggle. It is significant, however, that because the document accords to the workplace the sole source of revolutionary struggle, it is unable to conceive of the role of other classes. Indeed, it barely mentions other classes and makes no reference at all to the "rural poor". For the document, other classes are simply passive entities to be drawn behind the active, working class.

Thus, from the starting point that the working class is the leading force, the document moves more or less to the position that the working class is the *only* force in the revolutionary struggle. From that position it is a short step to the view that the political organization of the working class must occur within the factory and from that notion to the idea that the trade union movement (rather [than] its revolutionary wing) is the political organiser and leading organization of the entire revolutionary movement on all its fronts.

It is clear, however, that the political leadership of the revolutionary movement must be in a position to organise the unity of all oppressed classes on the basis of a broad revolutionary programme. Such a task cannot be fulfilled by an organization of trade unions, though it can of course play a part in it.

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# A Trade Union is Not a Political Party

*A Critique of the Speech: 'Where FOSATU Stands'*

**"Toussaint", African Communist, Second Quarter, 1983**

*"The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation etc."*

**Lenin: What is to be done?**

Every serious trade union organisation, sooner or later, has to face the challenge of passing beyond the limits of pure trade union affairs – that is, the regulation of relations between workers and employers – and moving on to political action. Every serious trade union, sooner or later finds that its union claims are being resisted not by the employers alone, but by the combination of bosses and state; the state intervenes in the struggle to contain the union by means of law or direct police intervention and suppression, and by the oppression, bribery or corruption of the union leadership. If the union is to achieve its aims – or in some situations if the union is even to survive – it inevitably has to turn its attention to political action to protect or advance 'the interests of its members and the gains previously won by union action.

Nowhere is the impulse towards political action by trade unions more compelling than in a repressive police state like South Africa, where even 'pure' trade unionism hangs constantly on the edge of illegality. Police intervention in every union or even local factory dispute is routine, and so is the use of brutality and terrorism against union leaders and militants. The systematic racial oppression of the political system overflows into systematic political persecution of the black workers' trade unions.

South Africa's black workers have always therefore gravitated easily towards politically involved trade unionism. The Western European concept of some sort of idealised

'non-political' trade unionism has never gained much credence or support. There have, certainly, been many trade union attempts to maintain a precarious legality within the police state by denying any political aspirations or connection. But such attempts are invariably short-lived. At the first real clash of economic interests between workers and boss, there is direct police-state intervention; and the union must either retire from the struggle and lose credibility amongst its members, or broaden the struggle to take on the bosses' state. Political struggle is thus at the centre of all serious black unionism in South Africa.

It is this broader aspect of political action by trade unions which forms the main thrust of the keynote speech to the April 1982 FOSATU conference, made by its general secretary Joe Foster. FOSATU (the Federation of South African Trade Unions) was then only three years old. It had achieved some considerable success both in terms of members organised, unions affiliated and shop and industrial struggles successfully waged. But already the limitations of purely union organisation and activity had forced themselves to the forefront:

*“Has our organisational activity developed workers' leadership that can give guidance and direction to all workers? (My emphasis T.) ... If we were to think in terms of our members only we would have a very limited political role. If however we are thinking more widely of the working class, then we have to examine very much more carefully what our political role is.”*

There is nothing in the speech to indicate why a trade union federation should be concerned to give leadership to all workers, or think beyond the confining limits of its own members to the wider working class beyond; or even why a political role should assume such importance in its thinking. One might assume that this derives from some of FOSATU's experience. Perhaps so. But certainly in Foster's own speech it appears as a statement of belief and faith, rather than a distillation from experience. The point might appear to be a quibble. But in this case, I think not. Foster's whole, speech, as I shall attempt to point out, is a statement of faith, of belief rather than of concrete lessons drawn from concrete experience. Though it addresses itself to vitally important issues, it seems to me to be flawed by a fatal weakness; it disregards the real experiences of the working class and pins its argument instead on an unquestioning faith, founded, it would seem, in some unstated 'theory' – or perhaps dogma.

## Central Issue

Yet without doubt this matter of the relationship between trade union and political activity is one of the central issues for the South African working class; and so too is the even more complex matter of the relationship between working class politics and the broad, inter-class popular political struggle led by the South African liberation movement. Political theorists and thinkers of differing views have put forward trenchant and profoundly argued theses on such topics, not just in the recent period but for over sixty years of growth in South African working class numbers and political experience. Deep splits and schisms in the working class ranks have formed on such issues; organisations have been built to prosper or founder on one or other view translated into actual political practice. No serious discussion of the matter then can leave all this historical experience out of consideration, ignore it altogether, and reopen the debate anew as though it is now being aired from the beginning and for the first time.

Yet Foster does just that. His analysis is one which places before FOSATU a clean slate, on which they may write anything at all without any suspicion of what has been written by others, and without any need to consider it. His only reference to any past experience of working class political movements whatsoever are to some from the advanced industrial countries of Europe; there the workers' movements he sees as many sided combinations of trade unions, political parties, co-operatives and publishing houses - "powerful social forces in these societies", but where the guiding reins of society nevertheless remain in the hands of hostile elements like Reagan and Thatcher. As for the experience of the socialist countries, great achievements of real benefit to the workers have been recorded, he states, but "there is still need for workers to control their own destiny", as evidenced by Solidarnosc in Poland. But from South African history apparently nothing.

*"Worker activities such as strikes and protests do not in themselves mean that a working class movement or working class politics exist . . . In South Africa we cannot talk of a working class movement as we have defined it above (from Western Europe T). Whilst there is undoubtedly a large and growing working class, its power is only a potential power since as yet it has no definite social identity of itself as a class."*

Clearly then the questions that have to be asked are many. If there is no workers' movement yet, after over sixty years of trade unionism of one sort or another, why not? What tangible change in the conditions of life would such a movement offer the working class other than "a social identity of itself?" How can such a movement now be built when it has never previously been done? And what will its relationship be to the broad national liberation and political movements within the country which already exist and already represent some – if not all – of the interests of workers?

It is not part of my critique of Foster's speech to complain that he does not provide definitive answers to these questions; they are difficult enough to give any analyst of the South African scene a great deal to ponder over and deter answers. My critique rests rather on the fact that these questions are not asked at all. They are simply brushed aside. Foster says:

*"It is not possible in a paper such as this to deal fully with all the developments in South Africa's history that have led to the non-existence of a workers' movement".*

True enough. But the historical fact is that at least one organisation – the Communist Party – has existed for over sixty years; it claims to be a political expression of the working class; it has -or had at one time or another – those other attributes of a "movement" – co-operatives, publishing organisations and closely linked trade union connections.

But Foster ignores these facts entirely, without even a passing reference or consideration.

He is less cavalier in his treatment of the most significant and flourishing political movement in the country – the African National Congress, which carries the present political aspirations of the majority of the black working class as well as other classes of oppressed South Africans. His explanation for this phenomenon is in sharp contrast with his "clean slate" view of the working class movement. His theme runs thus: South Africa's history has been one of "great repression, and the major ideological instrument for this oppression has been racism ... " Consequently, the main task of the people has been to attack the repressive regime; and accordingly there has grown up a tradition of "popular or populist" politics, of which the ANC is the foremost example; it "...rose to be one of the great liberation movements in Africa." There were admittedly also unions, and

*"occasions when workers resisted by strike action, protest and organisation. Yet this by itself cannot constitute a working class movement. While the unions were often prominent they were always small and weakly organised ... They could not provide an organisational base for a working class movement as we have defined it above ... The effective political role of progressive unions and of worker activity was to provide a crucial part of any popular struggle and that was to give it its 'Worker Voice.' The progressive trade unions became part of the popular struggle against oppression. They did not and probably could not have provided the base for working class organisation."*

But yet the activities of these same unions have been" ...very important in creating the conditions that led to the emergence, in the last ten to fifteen years, of the present progressive trade unions."

## History is More Complex

On the face of it, there is some factual basis for this analysis. But history teaches something different, more complex and – for the thesis on workers' political movements – more important than this. The whole of South African trade union history shows that, in real life, the problem was not that trade unions failed to provide the base from which political organisation and activity could develop; but rather that political movements – in particular Communism – provided the basis for trade union organisation.

The history of South African trade unionism is only partly a history of spontaneous banding together of workers in one or several work-places; mainly, it is a history of organisational drives deliberately undertaken by dedicated political activists, acting in response to policy decisions by political movements, especially from the Communist Party. Certainly many of their union structures were weak and poorly organised. But nonetheless, these were the pioneers who laid the base for future organisations, and often too for popular mass political struggles. It is impossible to comprehend the upsurge of militant popular national struggles without taking account of the formative and trail-blazing actions; for example, the black miners in their 1946 strike, organised and led by union and Communists together, sowed a new wave of mass militancy which included the final boycotting of Smuts' 'toy telephone', the Native Representative Council. Or for example the pass burning campaigns organised by Congress, Communists and the ICU in an earlier age; or the great popular strikes of the 1960's [sic] and the first such – the May Day [1950] strike called jointly by the Council of Non-European Trade Unions and the Communist Party.

History needs to be studied as it happened; not in the abstract. And if it is, it reveals a picture vastly different from Foster's exposition of it. It would show, for instance, that it is false to claim that the mere numerical growth of the working class in the 1950's gave the 'popular' movement need to "include the workers ... and as a result SACTU became an important element in the Congress Alliance." On the contrary, the growing militancy and political awareness of the working class forced other classes in the so-called 'populist' – properly the 'national liberation' -movement to recognise it as a leading force and to adopt ever more socialist-inclined policies as a consequence of it.

But why dispute these points? Foster's main point is one that cannot be disputed; that the workers need to find a basis for broadening out from simple trade unionism, to political organisation. Agreed. Yet I believe that it is necessary to dispute false arguments even when argued in a good cause; failure to do so will lead in the end to wrong policies and wrong decisions on how to proceed. Omission of all consideration of the experience of earlier times, and the omission of all reference to the rich experience of the Communist Party does in fact lead Foster, in my view, to many false

conclusions – most important the conclusion that FOSATU itself provides the only starting point and base from which to build a new workers' movement.

In fact, the South African working class has passed well beyond the starting point. It has formed political parties and widely based community organisations of many different types, ranging from residents' associations to peasants' leagues, from youth and students' bodies to national liberation movements. It has formulated detailed programmes, operated constitutions, debated tactics, established codes of membership behaviour, and so on. Nothing that is now proposed by Foster has not in fact been done before. It may, of course, be argued that the results of all those past activities are disappointing, or that the lines followed in both policy and organisation were misconceived. But if so, that must be said; the reasons for it must be analysed and absorbed, or the same results will flow again from any new attempt. The claim that FOSATU can now, without reference to the rich experience of the past, produce the definitive working class movement which will have none of the disabilities of those earlier attempts remains – however one dresses it up in rhetoric – not a sound political guide but an article of faith.

The accumulated experience of the working class – both of our own country and many others – has been distilled into a body of political knowledge and understanding we call Marxism-Leninism. The growth of the South African working class in numbers and in militancy has been marked by a growth also in political consciousness, and thus a growth in the seriousness with which working class politicians treat Marxism-Leninism. It is, of course, understandable that those speaking in public, in the midst of South African police hostility to anything that smacks of Marxism, will use caution in choosing their words. But the contributions of Marxist thinkers and writers to a uniquely working class view of South Africa and its problems cannot be dismissed because of a legal need for caution.

## Theoretical Basis

On what theory then is Foster's faith based? There are three main strands to his theoretical exposition.

*Strand one:* In South Africa capitalist production massively dominates all other forms of production. There are no great agricultural landlords, "and no significant peasantry or collective agriculture". Almost all the working population depend upon wage labour in industry or agriculture. There is no significant petty bourgeoisie or landed class with a solid economic base. Hence, "In the economy capital and labour are the major forces", and face each other across the battle frontiers.

*Second strand:* The ANC – the major force now challenging the South African state – arose as a populist movement against oppression when capital was still not fully developed, and could thus hide itself behind the front of race oppression. Its popular appeal at home and its wide acceptance abroad limit its effectiveness; it has to advance its popularity by claiming credit for all forms of internal resistance, with a tendency to "...encourage undirected opportunistic activity." It has to retain links with both West and East by apparent neutrality in the Great Power struggle, and "...certainly could not appear to offer a serious socialist alternative ... " This "must seriously affect its relationship to workers."

*Third strand:* "Most unions and their leadership lack confidence" to act as a real workers' leadership. "They see their role as part of a wider struggle, but are unclear on what is required for the worker struggle... Energy is spent establishing unity across a wide front. Such a position is clearly a great strategic error." Popular mass movements aiming at the overthrow of the regime cannot deal with the particular problems of workers. "It is therefore essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider political struggle ... and ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters."

What sort of a theoretical basis does all this provide for the working class – which is after all the whole point and purpose of Foster's address? At its best it can only be found simplistic and imprecise. In it, it is true, there are echoes of Marxist and national liberationist theory, but strangely watered down, perhaps even weakened or distorted beyond recognition. Consider, for example, the simplistic way in which the presence in South Africa of some million rural subsistence or below-subsistence farmers are dismissed in the casual phrase - "no significant peasantry"; and contrast it with the much deeper and richer analysis of the rural population and their place in the political development of South Africa made in either the Freedom Charter or the Communist Party's programme. Foster's simplistic approach is not criticised here because it is

inadequate, but because it is wrong; and being wrong it provides a wrong basis for the political programme which flows from it. That is a programme of simple confrontation between workers and "capital" from which the remaining sectors of South African society, probably numerically the majority of the population, are excluded. They are left like superfluous actors, unheard and unseen in the wings of a great drama, which is to be completed without any call ever being made upon them.

Or consider again the explanation of ANC "populism", which it is said makes it incapable of offering a serious socialist alternative: namely, that the search for support amongst all classes at home and both power blocs abroad produces opportunism. That there are such pressures within the mass movement cannot be denied; but such a simple explanation is not just a partial truth; it is a profound distortion. It ignores the reality of a strong and constantly growing working class influence in the ANC, which has given rise to socialist-inclined policies as witnessed by the Freedom Charter's provisions on land and monopoly industries, and even more strongly by the 1969 policy Strategy and Tactics. It underplays, almost to the point of extinction, the continuing existence of national oppression, which provides a fertile soil for continuing –perhaps even growing national consciousness and national unity. On this thoroughly misleading presentation, the contribution of the national struggle to the class struggle is ignored, and a new prop added to the simple we-against-them, worker-against-capital concept in Foster's thesis.

What is new in Foster's thesis, then, is not its general starting point that the special needs of the working class can best be met by an independent organisation of that class –for that has been the common credo of the politically conscious workers since the first working-class political body emerged in this country near the beginning of the century.

What is new – or perhaps not so much new as deviant – is that Foster presents this conclusion not from the background of real South Africa, but from an imaginary one which reveals no trace of any existing workers' political movement, no trace of any significant class forces other than wage labourers and capitalists, and no appreciation that the great national liberation movement is more than an irrelevancy. It is a thesis much favoured by some left socialist theorists in Western Europe, themselves totally foreign to the reality of South African conditions, however deeply steeped they may be in Marxist-sounding dogmas. It has not been taken up with any fervour in South Africa until now, for in the highly politically charged atmosphere of South Africa, bitter experiences of setbacks and defeats by the regime have dealt harshly with dogmas taken over unthinkingly from the armchairs of Europe. .

## What Sort of Workers' Movement?

I cannot end this critique without paying some attention to Foster's concept of the organisation that workers need "to exercise their independent political role". There can be little doubt that Foster is right in his contention that "...workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation." But there is a chasm between this simple truth and his next conclusion; which is that the South African workers must therefore now seek to build their own, new organisation. This is a leap without any run-up or take-off; no serious thinker about South Africa's future can accept it without question. The questions crowd in. What sort of movement? With what programme and purpose? Why separate from all other existing workers' movements? How related to the main movement of today, the national movement led by the ANC? And so on and so forth. And the peculiarly South African question: is a movement fostered by a black trade union movement to be a black workers' movement, or just a workers' movement?

To most of this there is little answer. The main vital questions remain unasked by him, and thus unanswered. In place of these central questions of why, and what for, he proceeds directly to the question that can only follow behind: how? Or what he describes as concrete tasks and challenges."

*"What is crucial in organisation is the quality of that organisation – the quality that gives it its overall direction and capability... Three factors ... affect the quality of worker organisation – the structure of organisational strength and decision making; the location of organisational strength, and the political qualities of its leadership structure."*

Maybe. On the 'structure of organisational strength', he says that FOSATU has been built on the factory floor, its shop stewards participating in a democratic process of decision making and struggle. "FOSATU's role is to link industrial unions into a tight federation"; its task in the years ahead must be "... to consolidate and develop factory organisation." It must seek to locate its organisational strength strategically "in the major industries... to be a national presence ...which should be able to dominate industrial areas. By doing this we create the major means whereby worker organisation can play a significant if not dominant role in the communities that surround these industrial areas."

As for quality of leadership: "We are not talking about leadership in the sense that it is usually discussed – which is in terms of individuals and great men ... What we are interested in is the elected representatives of workers and the officials they appoint ..." And so on, though the precise sense is not very clear. We are told for, instance, that "... workers' leadership is related to your job and therefore your wage and

therefore your ability to survive ...The most appropriate comparison is with the guerrilla fighter". Etc, etc. The precise meaning as I say is obscure.

But the thinking behind it emerges quite clearly. It is all of a piece with what has gone before. It is the belief that the trade union organisations and trade union struggles can suffice for all the needs of the working class; that in the unions and through union struggles the working class will achieve unity, it will learn politics, it will acquire the skills needed to take over the guiding reins of society, manage the whole of industry and society, and reconstruct it on a new socialist base. It is a belief that socialist consciousness can develop spontaneously from the union experience, and that the affairs of society and state can be best managed from the 'grass roots' democracy of the shop floor.

Political theorists would probably describe this type of ideology as "syndicalism." The label itself is of no importance. What is important is to establish whether it is well founded and therefore valid for the South African working class and for FOSATU. But we are back looking at Foster's clean slate. There is no evidence, no reference to the experience of others, no historical precedents. Only the speaker's belief. Faith.

But history is not a clean slate. There is a vast accumulation of experience by the working class of our own country and others over the decades since capitalism first emerged full blown on the social scene. South African workers dare not ignore it, in order instead to follow some passionate article of faith, held as tenaciously – without proof or verification – as any religious dogma. Our accumulated experience tells us that the trade unions alone, the workers' struggle alone will not of itself, pass beyond the limits of economic struggle against the employers. To pass beyond that limit, there is need for a clear socialist theory, which understands the nature and the course of development of capitalist society, and which can thus point the way in which socialism can be reached, and the steps that have to be taken to get there.

Socialist theory and ideology we have in plenty, bequeathed to us by great thinkers of the past like Marx, Engels and Lenin and many others, added to daily by profound thinkers in many countries including our own who have constantly enriched our fund of knowledge out of new experiences of our own times. All this cannot be discovered instinctively, grasped from the air by even the most militant worker. It has to be learnt through study; and it has to be applied deliberately by conscious decision making – not hoped for as a miraculous consequence of spontaneous action of revolt or resistance.

It is for this reason that Marxists have always understood that there are limitations to the trade union role in changing society – limits beyond which it cannot advance without the aid and co-operation of a detachment armed with an advanced theory

and with a dedication and discipline which will enable it to impart consciousness to the class – a detachment called a political party.

Foster seems to sidestep this issue by somewhat unclear references to a "workers' movement" and "worker leadership". But it cannot be sidestepped without seriously misleading the workers, and FOSATU itself. To claim in the face of historical facts that "...there has not been and is not a working class movement in South Africa" is false. There has been and is. There has been and is a political party of the working class. To attempt to form a new movement without first setting the record straight must lead to confusion, perhaps disaster. The Communist Party, it is true, keeps a low profile in the public eye in South Africa, as it must. It is an organisation working underground and hunted, not in the open where publicity could be gained. But the existence and achievements of the Communist Party are well known to everybody. Its members today are in the front line of struggle. Dare FOSATU ignore this? And dare it ignore either the confusion and division it will sow in the ranks of the working class if it sets up a new "workers' movement" in competition with or alongside the still living Communist Party? And dare it ignore the disruptive and divisive effect its "workers' movement" may have on the premier force in the country, the African National Congress, if the relations between its "workers' movement" and its "worker leadership" on the one hand and the national liberation movement on the other is not defined and clarified?

Perhaps Foster's address is only a first step in the clarification of his own and FOSATU's ideas. If I have been harsh in my critique of those ideas, it is because they deal with a serious and important matter – perhaps the most important theoretical and practical matter before the South African workers today. And just because of the serious nature of the matter, Foster, FOSATU and everyone else in the working class ranks must expect to be judged by the seriousness with which they tackle it.

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