This pamphlet is a collection of articles exploring the concept, history and anarchist/syndicalist approaches to United Fronts – and their relevance and potential for building working class unity in South Africa – written in the context of the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa)'s resolution, following its historic 2013 Special National Congress, to break with the ANC-led Alliance and form a 'United Front against neoliberalism' ★

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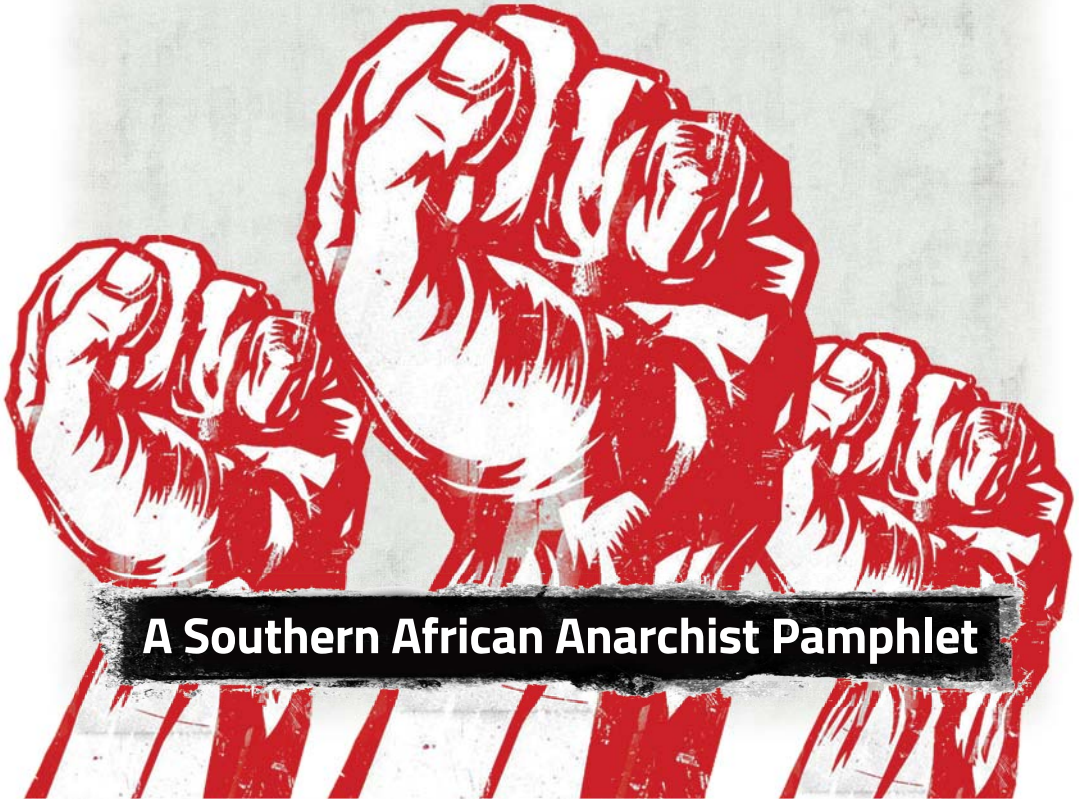
Building Working Class Unity in South Africa:

Lessons from United Fronts in Germany, Italy and Russia



A Southern African Anarchist Pamphlet

Building Working Class Unity in South Africa:

Lessons from United Fronts in Germany, Italy and Russia

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★ First Zabalaza Books edition, July 2019 ★

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Introduction:

Class Struggle, the Left and Power

Twenty-five years into democracy the black working class majority in South Africa has not experienced any meaningful improvements in its conditions. The apartheid legacy of unequal education, healthcare and housing and the super-exploitation of black workers continues under the ANC and is perpetuated by the neoliberal policies it has imposed.

These troubles are part of the world's troubles; this neoliberalism is part of global neoliberalism. As the global economic crisis deepens, the global ruling class is making the working class pay, transferring the costs to workers and the poor, leading to increased poverty, unemployment, inequality and insecurity. And so in South Africa neoliberal oppression is piled on top of national oppression.

The only force capable of changing this situation is the working class locally and internationally. Yet to do so, struggles need to come together, new forms of organisation appropriate to the context are needed; and they need both to be infused with a revolutionary progressive politics and to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Some such struggles have occurred over recent years, including the historic platinum mineworkers' strike and farmworkers' strike in 2012; but the many struggles have not yet pulled together into a new movement.

Outside the ANC alliance, there have indeed been many efforts to unite struggles – but these have largely failed to resonate with the working class in struggle and form the basis of a new movement.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the newly-formed Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) – which got less than 25 000 votes in the national

elections, despite the fact that the union that conceived it, Numsa, claims nearly 400 000 members.

NUMSA's Non-Moment

When the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) announced its resolutions, following its historic 2013 Special National Congress, to break with the ANC and SACP and to form a "United Front against neoliberalism", many on the left were hopeful that this would give working class movements the new ideological and organisational direction they need.

The United Front, Numsa said, was not about building a new organisation, party or labour federation but "a way to join other organisations in action, in the trenches", gaining community support for Numsa campaigns and building "concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place".

It looked as if there hopes were not misplaced when, for example, unemployed youth and community activists across the country responded positively to Numsa's call by supporting the 19 March 2014 actions against the Youth Wage Subsidy. Branches were set up and, despite initial scepticism, community activists joined.

By August 2017, however, the Johannesburg branch of the United Front had declared that, "After the initial enthusiasm, there is now a feeling the UF has largely collapsed, with only a couple of local structures still active." Numsa had shifted its focus and resources to establishing a "Movement for Socialism" because "the working-class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa".

Having gained some community support for its campaigns, including the United Front itself, the success of the United Front in building working class unity going forward depended on whether Numsa would reciprocate by putting its resources and capacity at the service of building "concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place".

Instead, Numsa put its energies into calling for a new workers' party, while presenting itself as the vanguard of the whole working class, and in so doing missed its moment.

What we should think of, rather, is building and strengthening a working class front, based on unions, community-based movements, left groups, cooperatives, etc., which can cooperate around specific campaigns and demands. These movements should be internally democratic, politically pluralist in which different left groups can cooperate with one another — and frankly, much more importantly — engage the mass movements. Movements in which different perspectives are encouraged, developed and tested. No group surrenders political independence — the right to have, express and campaign for their views — in the name of unity, but all can cooperate on specific issues.

The idea is not to wish away difference, and to create a party for the working class, but to unite big and small working class formations; the idea is not to pretend difference doesn't exist, or to conflate the working class movement with one ideology; the idea is that difference and debate are essential, not outdated, dogmatic, pointless. It is destructive only of centralised authority, of dictatorship.

This does not mean a conference or symposium of the left is in and of itself useless, but previous attempts have almost certainly descended into different groups and individuals giving their positions, without a useful discussion of convergence or divergence. More important is to have debates and discussions within the larger working class and its movements beyond the left, where there is working class engagement with different ideas, the test of practice, using an ongoing series of workshops, meetings, locals, media and campaigns. In such a situation there is a battle of ideas and a battle for the leadership of ideas, most surely, while guarding against a manipulation of processes, closing debates by labels, or a "big man" politics of demagogy.

tion, and social democrat-led governments crushing revolutions.

What is of greater importance is a unity through organisation around and in working class struggle. It also means realising the inevitability of conflict, but utilising it as a means of revolutionary institutional and theoretical development. Most surely, a programme of action is needed if these, our organisations seek transformation of society, and if we aim to create unity across the many sites of working class organization and struggle.

However, this programme, its philosophy, key concepts and ideas for change and reconstruction must be tested and reformulated in struggle. Here, struggle is not only meant the fight for better day-to-day working and living conditions, greater political freedoms, and so on. It also involves the constant and consistent development of ideas and action. This requires engaging ideas in an open, honest, critical and self-reflective way, contributing to the development of the instruments of revolutionary, socialist class struggle: the workers' organisations (like unions and community-based organisations) to build the power for thorough-going socio-economic reconstruction (the revolution).

This internal developmental struggle in movements should be waged as a battle of ideas between, yes, competing ideological sets for influence in, but never imposed onto the mass movement. To claim that your theory not only understands the path of history, but the eventuality of the destination and thus its own theoretical purity, is pure delusion. We can safely predict particular patterns based on historical precedent, but such definite assertions and teleologies are unscientific, uncritical and effectively impose a claim on and structure of leadership. These leadership forms develop and assert immovable control over movements, suck the creative life out of movements and are fundamentally authoritarian, no matter the initial individual characteristics of those making them.

It is deeply misleading to present theory as a pointless distraction from struggle as it is shaped by and builds it. Anti-theoretical approaches present difference as a problem of dogma or sectarianism — and therefore cannot see that differences are useful — or present theory as a lazy "armchair" indulgence that prevents us "doing" things. But theory is both a process and an instrument of human action and socialist theory cannot, therefore, be divorced from progressive socialist action.

Thus any call for left unity, no matter how well-intentioned, fails to address the fact that many left ideologies exist, and misses the point altogether as to what should drive the socialist social transformation many of us are working towards.

The SRWP won't set you free

Numsa undertook to "conduct a thoroughgoing discussion on previous attempts to build socialism as well as current experiments to build socialism" and "commission an international study on the historical formation of working-class parties, including exploring different type of parties – from mass workers' parties to vanguard parties". But it already knew what it was aiming for. It had said that a new political party was on the cards – to replace the SACP, which had become corrupted by the neoliberal state, as the political vanguard of the working class.

The potential of the United Front approach for building working class unity is precisely because it accommodates ideological differences in order to build the unity of working class formations in struggle. But Numsa still looks to the legacy of Communist Parties. And these parties have historically used united fronts to create unity in action in struggles against capitalist attacks, but also with the aim of winning over the majority in these struggles to their programme – in this case the formation of a new party, that they would lead – under their Party leadership and no one else's.

While Numsa has broken with Cosatu and the SACP organisationally, it has not broken with them ideologically. The Numsa bureaucrats' belief that they are the vanguard of the working class and their insistence on building a party to contest state power are founded on the same ideological certainties and theoretical understandings of class, power and the nature of the state as the SACP – with the same strategic implications that, invariably, will have the same disappointing outcomes.

If we really want to build a movement for socialism, and to avoid merely replacing one set of rulers for another, the authoritarian left needs to rethink its understandings class, power and the nature of the state in light of the imperial evidence and learn from the mistakes of the past, instead of repeating them and expecting a different outcome.

This pamphlet is a collection of articles – written in the context of the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa)'s resolution, following its historic 2013 Special National Congress, to break with the ANC-led Alliance and form a 'United Front against neoliberalism' – intended to contribute to that discussion by exploring the concept, history and anarchist/syndicalist approaches to United Fronts and their relevance and potential for building working class unity in South Africa.

Jonathan Payn

Chapter 1:

NUMSA and the 'United Front against Neoliberalism'

by Jonathan Payn (ZACF)

Part 1 in a series of articles on the concept and history of the United Front. This article first appeared in *Workers World News*.

The resolution adopted by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to form a 'United Front against neoliberalism' – as well as its decision not to endorse the ANC in the elections – represents an interesting development in the political landscape, one which activists should look at carefully and engage. Due to the language used by the media, the Left, NUMSA's critics and even NUMSA itself much confusion surrounds the debate – leaving many questions: Is the 'United Front' an organisation or attempt to build a new labour federation or political party? Is it an attempt to revive the 1980s United Democratic Front (UDF)? Why NUMSA's sudden interest in community struggles?

This series, of which this article is the first, aims to clarify these and other questions by looking at the proposal and history of united fronts locally and internationally to clarify key issues and draw lessons that activists can use when engaging the pros and cons of NUMSA's United Front proposal and if and how they think it should be developed.

A different call for left unity calls for a Mass Workers Party. But this idea is rooted in the Marxist tradition. The call skips very serious debates, particularly over state power, the role of unions, electoralism, representative versus participatory democracy, vanguardism etc. It does not engage with whether an approach based on capturing individual states can achieve anything under neoliberal globalisation.

While both Marxists, social democrats and nationalists are agreed on a project of political parties capturing state power, anarchism arises as a working class socialist ideological movement that rejects exactly this approach. It is a critique of the standard Marxist political programme but tied to a distinctive anarchist analysis of the state itself as a fundamental site of minority class rule.

Now, there may be many ideas common to both Marxist and anarchist branches of the socialist family, such as the necessity of mass working class struggle, anti-capitalism, etc. But there are deep differences of philosophy.

These include, but are not limited to, on one hand theory, such as anarchism's very different analysis of what the state is and how it works, what class is, whether capitalism can be progressive, etc. This approach leads to the anarchist view that states and parties aiming at state power cannot be used to create a free, non-capitalist social order. On the other hand, as regards application, see also anarchism's vehement insistence on democratic, collective self-reliance and individual freedom within a cooperative communal society; versus the state and party-centred approach that has overwhelmingly dominated in Marxism. An approach, located in its own historical canon, which anarchists argue, amongst other claims attributed to it, gives Marxism its fundamentally authoritarian and anti-democratic nature.

These differences are not a matter of dogmatism or sectarianism. They should also not be erased in the name of "left unity", which effectively puts the South African left back on the statist track.

Obviously there are and will be many areas of cooperation and campaigning — would there really be any serious division over, for example, opposing gender-based violence, climate change, organizing workplaces, fighting for land reform?

There will always, however, be a parting of ways over how to pursue these aims, over long-term vision and so on, as per the dictates of ideological difference.

Silencing the debate in the name of unity might be well-intentioned, but it shuts down useful debates and democratic space. Additionally, it prefigures a politics that views difference as dangerous. Historically this, when taken to extremes, saw Marxists in state power lining up left opponents for jail, exile and/or execu-

constructive) debate and disagreement. In other words it contributes to social change.

This process requires real engagement and thus also requires avoiding a politics of labelling opponents in a derogatory way or with caricatures in order to dismiss instead of engage them. Dismissing whole sets of ideas and experiences by labelling them dogmatic, divisive or outdated (or ultra-left or reactionary etc.) is itself dogmatic.

The term "left", and the term socialism, are not and cannot be reducible to any one of these ideologies, and in particular, are not reducible to Marxism.

If left unity means real unity of praxis it would mean a synthesis. However, a synthesis is not truly possible, given how radically different left traditions are. Either it will create something incoherent or extremely vague (how can you, for example, really blend Leninist vanguardism with anarcho-syndicalist counter-power?) or it will be a unity in name only, but where one pre-existing outlook is imposed.

If it's the former, it will not do anything to take the left forward but remove clarity. If the latter, it involves prescribing, somewhat arrogantly, one specific theoretical approach while labelling other views as outdated, dogmatic, divisive etc.

This latter approach, unfortunately, has become common practice in many contexts, including in South Africa. It usually means dismissing other views, then prescribing a programme that is basically a brand of Leninism or a left version of social-democracy, often under labels like "21st century socialism," "democratic socialism" or socialist renewal.

Disastrous past failures are skipped or excused or presented in the best possible light. It is not explained how, for example, Leninism will not (yet again) end in a dictatorship, after it has had over 30 dictatorships and not one example of anything like a workers democracy. It is not explained how, after every single Keynesian government failed in the face of capitalist globalisation, social-democratic schemes will suddenly work now, under global capitalism.

A lot of what is presented as new or as innovative is old wine in new bottles. Ideas get put in new bottles. For example, the idea of building a solidarity economy of cooperatives to end or exit capitalism is very old, going back to P.J. Proudhon in the 1840s; the idea of state-funded worker-run farms goes back to Louis Blanc in the same period. Both approaches have failed to create anything able to end capitalism for over 150 years and it's not clear why they should be tried yet again.

Global Capitalist Crisis and a stalled Revolution

To understand NUMSA's decision to break with the ANC and SACP, and the potential its call for a united front could offer for building a working class-based alternative to the ANC-led Alliance and its neoliberal policies, activists must contextualise these decisions and unpack what NUMSA understands by the United Front.

NUMSA has noted that, twenty years after the democratic transition, the majority-black working class has not experienced meaningful improvements in its conditions. At the same time, however, a small black elite has become super wealthy. In South Africa NUMSA has noted that the neoliberal restructuring, implemented by the ANC government and supported by its Alliance partners, has been aimed at benefiting the capitalist class and has resulted in the increased dominance of finance capital, in massive job losses and increased poverty and inequality.

'A Weapon for Uniting the Working Class'

NUMSA claims not to see the United Front as a new organisation or party but a mechanism "to mobilise the working class in all their formations into a United Front against neoliberalism". Whereas NUMSA sees the Alliance as "simply a mechanism for mobilising a vote for the ANC", it envisions the United Front as a "mobilising tool to organise and coordinate working class struggles".

The United Front is also not about building a new labour federation as NUMSA is calling on COSATU to join it in breaking with the Alliance and building a new movement. Nor is it an attempt to simply revive the UDF. Rather, it is "a way to join other organisations in action, in the trenches", through sharing common struggles.

NUMSA says that "better working conditions are inseparable from the working class community struggles for transportation, sanitation, water, electricity and shelter" and that it wants to break down the barriers that exist between worker and community struggles. The two pillars on which its United Front would stand are gaining community support for NUMSA campaigns and building "concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place".

‘NUMSA is part of the Community, and NOT the Community’

For many community activists the question then is why now, after ignoring community struggles for so long, does NUMSA claim to want to support them? Moreover, why does NUMSA think it should lead this unification process? After all, community activists long ago identified the ANC’s neoliberal character.

Despite the fact that its members come from the communities NUMSA has not supported community struggles in recent years. Yet now it seems NUMSA wants to support community struggles and lead them in building a united front. While it might have a role to play, some community activists feel NUMSA cannot legitimately take the lead in uniting community struggles.

Instead they feel NUMSA should focus on building unity with other unions before approaching communities. Similarly, communities should first work together to unite their own struggles from the bottom up; a process that is already underway in parts of the country.

Only once community struggles are united and coordinated from below, by the activists involved, can they feel confident in uniting community and worker struggles without fear of bigger, more resourced organisations like NUMSA imposing themselves on them.

Conclusion

A good thing about the United Front is that it accommodates ideological differences in order to build the unity of working class formations in struggle. However, Communist Parties have historically engaged in united fronts to create unity in action in struggles against the onslaught of capitalism, but also with the aim of winning over the majority – who mostly (but not exclusively as there were other revolutionary currents) supported reformist social democratic parties – involved in these struggles to their programme and lead as a Party. When engaging the NUMSA United Front proposal, then, it is important to ask whether or not NUMSA also sees the United Front as a tactic to win what it has sometimes unfortunately described as leaderless and unorganised community struggles to its perspectives and to ensure they accept its leadership in struggles.

Chapter 6:

Left Unity, Left Co-Operation or a Working Class Front?

by Warren McGregor (ZACF)

A call for socialist Left unity is heard widely today in South Africa, but is usually taken as a call for unity of praxis (unity in theoretical programme and action). This is sometimes framed as transcending old divides (these seen as outdated, divisive or dismissed as dogmatic), and sometimes as unity in order to have action (rhetorically set up as the opposite of “arm chair” theory).

What do we as revolutionary anarchists think? We think this approach is fair in intention, asks important questions and aims at addressing the crisis of the left and working class movements.

However, the idea that divisions are outdated, divisive or dogmatic is incorrect. The “left” — taken here to mean socialist, and not which side of the Parliamentary aisle you sit on — is a spectrum in which a wide variety of anti- and non-capitalist ideologies and traditions rest, from the more reformist social-democracy on one end, to the revolutionary anarchist and Marxist sets, on the other.

Having these very different approaches is not what weakens the left. A call for left unity as a unity of praxis misunderstands (or ignores) the value of difference and progressive debate to theoretical development and strategic innovation. This development and innovation strengthens the left and is best antidote to being dogmatic — so long as it involves honest and open (but respectful and

We would also argue for raising specific slogans and ideas, like anti-electionism, collectivisation (over nationalisation/ privatization), self-management. The UF would also need to focus its work at the base, and not on committee work, while opposing the culture of demagogy that has affected many movements in SA. Related to this, there is a strong need to combat the tradition of political manipulation that currently grips much of the labour movement, and return it to a politics of openness, debate and political pluralism.

Community activists across the country have, despite scepticism, responded positively to NUMSA's call by supporting the 19 March actions against the Youth Wage Subsidy.

Will NUMSA reciprocate by putting its resources and capacity at the service of building "concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor "wherever and whenever they take place"?

The possibility of NUMSA playing any relevant role in fostering working class unity depends on the answer to this question.

Chapter 2:

Anti-Militarist United Fronts and Italy's "Red Week", 1914

by Jonathan Payn (ZACF)

Part 2 in a series of articles on the concept and history of the United Front. First published in issue 87 of Workers World News.

The United Front tactic – aimed at uniting masses of workers in action and winning Communist leadership for the working class – was adopted as policy by the Communist International (Comintern) in 1921 and will be discussed later in this series. However, there are important examples of working class unity in action which predate Comintern policy and bear relevance to the united fronts discussion. One often-cited example is the united front to defend the gains of the February Revolution from a military coup in Russia in 1917, which will be discussed in the next article in this series.

Before looking at this, however, there is another example of proletarian unity in action – that didn't seek to win Communist leadership – which warrants attention; that of a revolutionary worker-peasant alliance. This conception of united front action found expression in Italy's anti-militarist "red blocs" and it is to these that we now turn.

Counter-power requires more than a few leaders calling protests according to their own whims, and then arranging transport for everyone else to attend; it means active participation in decision-making, masses that run the organisations and set the agenda, clued-up, critical and questioning members that can avoid the trap of elections and control by parties or by a few leaders.

Mass movements like the UF need to be transformed in two ways in order to make them capable of such a task. They need to become organs of counter-power, and they need to be infused with revolutionary counter-culture. The CNT in 1930s Spain is a good example, where in some areas of Spain, the trade union itself took over the running of industry, transport, and distribution of goods – under direct control of union members.

Working within, Organising

How can we go about this? Clearly anarchist ideas won't spontaneously appear out of thin air. Although its insights have been derived through struggle, it has taken years of debate, discussion and active involvement by millions of people for anarchism to crystalize into a coherent ideology. Within that, we argue that a specific political organisation is necessary in order to fight for anarchism within the battle of ideas, to work within and alongside mass movements like the UF for democratic structures, participatory practices, and an anti-party, anti-state (anarchist) consciousness. The purpose is not to rally the masses under our "leadership" (like political parties, including so-called workers' parties do), but to rally the masses around the leadership of a specific set of ideas and practices (counter-power and counter-culture).

"Boring from within" mass movements requires non-sectarianism, and we do not object to working with other organisations of the left in committees or on campaigns where necessary. But we are not convinced by the calls for building unity within the left, since that is not our goal. Our orientation is not towards the left, but towards the masses – in their organisations in workplaces and communities – and our projects are often vastly different and require very different strategies that are often incompatible with much of the left's. By working in movements, we aim to retain our political independence, and operate by a clear plan, which means avoiding both "do-stuffism" (actions which do not tie into a clearly thought-through programme), and "liquidationism" (dissolving your own politics into that of another group).

Again, against the Party building Agenda

It is precisely because of the short-sighted nature of the politics of "doing stuff" that many comrades argue for an MWP as a means of breaking people from the ANC, of deepening political education, of uniting people. The idea is also that the MWP can somehow get control of the state, and use it to undertake massive reforms, perhaps even revolution.

In this sense, the MWP approach is a step forward from the protest politics approach, in that it recognizes that a focus on short-term issues and low levels of political education, are serious problems – that imply that real change is needed.

But the problem is that the MWP strategy cannot work. The existing situation does not allow a radical shift from neo-liberal policies via the state: there is little doubt that any radical party going into parliament will be corrupted, paralyzed or coopted. As experiences like Cuba and the Soviet Union show, putting a party in charge of a new "revolutionary" state creates a situation at least as bad as what we have – where an elite runs the show while the the masses are left outside.

A further problem is that the "party builders" see mass movements as a way of achieving something else, a means to an end. They do not see these movements as themselves the potential basis of a new society. The political perspective here is to get movements to endorse a party. The party is seen as the real and best way of struggle – and this almost always translates into running in elections. "Party builders" are often less concerned with building educated, bottom-up and democratic movements, than with pushing the party idea through. Often this programme is pushed through the unions and community structures by all sorts of questionable, top-down methods that are unable to bring the masses along. This is completely pointless, even damaging.

Our Line of March

Where do we differ? The difference is that anarchists/ syndicalists want to build a free society through class struggle. Concretely, the perspective is to build movements – including unions, community organizations, UF-type structures – in a way that leads to this goal. Form and method become central: leader-dominated, uneducated, "stepping-stone" movements that do not transcend protest, cannot generate a free society.

Prelude to Rebellion

In the early 1900s, there was strong worker and peasant opposition to Italian colonialism and military involvement in Eritrea, Abyssinia and Libya, and to the repression of the Italian working class by the state's armed forces.

Workers and peasants saw that, although soldiers came mostly from the working class and peasantry, the military and its colonial adventures only served the interests of the ruling class in its search for new markets and new sources of cheap labour and raw materials – as well as to suppress local working class struggles.

However, divisions emerged in the Italian socialist movement between its rank-and-file and the Italian Socialist Party's (PSI) reformist leaders, who rejected revolution – represented by anarchists, Bolsheviks and syndicalists – in favour of a gradual electoral transition to socialism. Shortly before Italy invaded Libya in 1911, the PSI's youth wing, the Italian Socialist Youth Federation – which rejected "reformism" – met with syndicalist youth organisations and agreed to co-operate in anti-war efforts. This co-operation, extended to anarchist youth as well, laid the basis for an anti-militarist united front or "red bloc".

1914 "Red Week"

By 1914, a twenty thousand-strong united front of workers and peasants from different political tendencies was organised against militarism. On Constitution Day, June 7 1914, this anti-militarist front organised a national demonstration against militarism and war. Fearing this front could lay the basis for a revolutionary "Red bloc" the government ordered troops to suppress the protests. Clashes between troops and anti-militarists erupted leaving three workers dead.

The proletariat took to the streets in response and rebellion engulfed the country. Before the dominant General Confederation of Labour (CGL) had responded the Italian Syndicalist Union and Chamber of Labour called a general strike. Dock and rail workers asserted their power in a crippling wave of protests and 50 000 workers marched in Turin in "iron ranks of class solidarity" when the CGL joined the call.

Although the socialist leadership had been divided over the call for a general strike the masses embraced it with revolutionary fervour. Barricades sprang up in the northern industrial centres. Self-governing communes were declared in

smaller towns and government officials forced to flee. About a million people participated and for ten days the city of Ancona was under the control of rebel workers and peasants.

The uprising, called the "Red week", differed from previous uprisings in extent and intensity – it spread across the country from north to south, in cities and countryside, and was offensive rather than defensive in nature. Many workers and peasants believed that revolution was possible and pushed to realise it.

Betrayal and Collapse

However, the reformists restated their view that socialism wouldn't be achieved by the masses' revolutionary impulses and rejected the need for a revolutionary rupture. They believed that the working class was not ready for socialism, that its "impulsiveness" was harmful and that socialists should "educate and civilise" the proletariat in order to prepare it for a gradual transition to socialism.

On seeing the situation develop into a potentially revolutionary uprising that they could not contain the CGL called off the strike after two days – over workers' heads and without consulting the PSI or other working class formations. In doing so they gagged the most conscious and rebellious working class militants and the revolutionary movement collapsed. Although ten thousand troops were needed to regain control of Ancona and in Marcas and Romagna anarchists, revolutionary socialists and Republicans maintained their posts in the streets, side-by-side, for a few days more.

Alternative Ending

However, not everyone shared this view and some socialists did believe that the masses were ready for and capable of revolution and that this was how socialism would come about.

Errico Malatesta, an anarchist leader of the uprising, pleaded with workers not to obey the CGL's order to end the strike; believing instead that the monarchy was collapsing and that revolution was indeed possible. For revolutionaries like Malatesta socialism would be achieved not through class compromise and elections, but through a working class revolution from below. Through the self-activity and self-organisation of the masses. For them socialists should encourage

very current in a sector of the NUMSA leadership, as well as in a certain sector of the UF, particularly amongst the Marxists. We oppose them, because we have no faith in the project of forming a "mass workers party" (MWP).

The Protest Politics of "Doing Stuff"

We also disagree with the many activists in SA who see the task in movements like APF and UF as simply building protests and fighting around immediate campaigns. From this perspective, the main aim of these comrades is to get as many people involved in actions as possible.

A key problem with this approach is that it is very short-term in outlook. There is no real discussion of how the protests can lay the basis for radical change; in fact, the aims are quite modest, and involve mostly fighting around some of the most immediate evils in our society, like electricity cut-offs. Politics becomes a matter of running from one event to the next; there is no real plan to build and expand mass movements; political debate and education is always kept at the level of issues like the problems of privatization; bigger issues like the ANC, the need to abolish the state and capitalism, and so on, are left out.

The problems people face have deep roots: while it is vital to fight around problems like cut-offs, these are rooted in major problems in the power industry, in the way the state runs, in the crisis of the capitalist economy. Therefore, to really solve the problem, you need radical changes, including a massive reallocation of resources to abolish poverty and inequality – and this means, revolution.

But for the protest politics people, this does not matter. So long as there is a big demonstration, these comrades are satisfied. This means that politics becomes reduced to the problem of getting the maximum turn-out at events. This often translates into recruiting "leaders," each claiming to represent a "community," who can then deliver masses on the days of action. No real care is taken to build multiple layers of activists to ensure the construction of strong democratic structures based on mandates and delegates. The protest agenda is also normally set here, by a small group, which also writes the press statements and discussion documents, and sets the slogans. Mass participation often involves little more than the masses being bussed to events, where it's really rent-a-crowd.

From the anarchist / syndicalist perspective, that does not take us anywhere, since our aim is to build working class movements that can resist today… but also take control in the future.

Therefore, all our activities must ultimately be structured around the goals of winning larger mass movements like the UF and the unions to these revolutionary, anti-party, anarchist perspectives. We, as the working class, have to stop making the same mistakes, of putting power in elite hands, of misleading people into electoral participation, and of limiting ourselves to reformism (i.e. to small, legal changes).

We, frankly, do not have the forces to win the UF over at this stage. A discussion of the best tactics to use in this situation belongs to another discussion. However, we must by all means at least raise the anarchist/ syndicalist perspectives of anarchism/ syndicalism in the UF and NUMSA where possible, as a basis of building a larger red-and-black anarchist/ syndicalist network.

Some Limits of the NUMSA Project

We do think, however, that it is just not enough to see the problem as lying solely in neo-liberalism or the ANC, as NUMSA seems to do. Neo-liberalism is the latest phase of capitalism; it does not arise from bad policy advisors or undue World Bank influence, but from the deep structure of the global political economy. Therefore it is absurd to think neo-liberalism can be gotten rid of simply by getting rid of the ANC. Any party in office would be under huge pressure to adopt much of the neo-liberal programme.

Since reformed forms of capitalism like the Keynesian Welfare State are no longer feasible (if they ever were in South Africa, but that is another story), it is problematic to pose the solution as keeping capitalism, but dumping neo-liberalism. This, however, is the direction in which both COSATU and NUMSA lean: despite their Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, their actual policy proposals – active industrial policy, protectionism, demand stimulation etc. – really amount to a programme of social democratic reform that is impossible to implement.

Second, while the ANC is part of the problem, it is not the whole problem. The whole political system is rotten. Parliament is a place where elites connive against the poor: the state itself is an apparatus of ruling class power, as bad as any capitalist corporation, which means that any party would end up as disappointing as the ANC. Both of these points mean that it is completely pointless to blame the ANC.

Given the power of the ANC in the minds of large parts of the working class, steps to discredit it are welcome. However, the idea that the solution is to replace the ANC with a better party should be firmly opposed. These ideas are

and stimulate this working class self-organisation and self-activity in preparation for the revolution, which would be cultivated by constant use of the strike weapon, culminating in a revolutionary general strike.

For these revolutionaries, the lesson of the Red Week is that the working class can be revolutionary and that it is strongest on its own terrain; outside and against the state. Rather than being harnesses to and held back by electoral parties it should organise independently as a class, across ideological lines, to overthrow the state and capitalism and replace them with directly democratic organs of working class self-governance.

After the Red Week uprising had been suppressed Malatesta declared, “Now… We will continue more than ever full of enthusiasm, acts of will, of hope, of faith. We will continue preparing the liberating revolution, which will secure justice, freedom and well-being for all.”

Chapter 3:

The 1917 Russian Revolution and United Front

by Jonathan Payn (ZACF)

Part 3 in a series of articles on the concept and history of the United Front.

In the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolshevik Party, together with other revolutionaries, overthrew the Provisional Government established in February and – together, initially, with left Social Revolutionaries – seized power. How did the Bolsheviks – a minority just eight months earlier, when the February Revolution overthrew the Tsar and established the Provisional Government – come to power so quickly? How did this small force emerge from relative obscurity to win large sections of the working class to its programme and take power? Herein lies the root and essence of United Front policy in a traditional Marxist sense.

Soviet Democracy and Revolution in February

During the February Revolution, workers, peasants and soldiers spontaneously rose up and seized land and factories throughout Russia establishing workers', peasants' and soldiers' councils – mass democratic organs of working class counter-power. These councils, known as soviets, elected their own delegates

Jakes Factoria and Tina Sizovuka respond:

What the UF will do, will depend on which perspectives win out in it. Our general anarchist/ syndicalist perspective is that the UF (as well as the unions, like the National Union of Metalworkers of SA, NUMSA) should be (re) built, as far as possible, into a movement of counter-power, outside and against the state and capital.

This means UF structures and affiliates should be developed into radical, democratic structures (in the workplaces and in communities) that can fight now against the ruling class, and that can eventually take power, directly. The UF should be (re)built into a direct action-based, direct democratic-structured movement for anarchist revolution. That means building structures in communities (street and ward committees and assemblies) that can replace municipalities, and developing the unions in the workplaces (through shopstewards committees and assemblies) into structures that can take over and run workplaces. This is not such a foreign concept in recent South African history: NUMSA's predecessor, MAWU, was involved in the movement for "people's power", which took many steps in this direction during the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s.

For this to happen, a second step is needed: mass movements like UF and unions must be infused with a revolutionary counter-culture. This means the masses are won over through anarchist political education, which is partly about building up the confidence and ability of workers and poor people to run society, including the understanding amongst the majority, that the tasks ahead are bigger than simply voting in elections or campaigning for reforms to the system. When we talk about the masses, we mean the broad working class, including the unemployed and poor, and working class people of all races, South African and immigrant.

The tasks are to build for anarchist revolution, using the strategic perspectives of counter-power and counter-culture. This means fighting for a self-managed society from below, won through revolution. The corrupt and oppressive political system (the state) and the exploiting and authoritarian economic system (capitalism) are completely and obviously unable to create a decent society, real democracy or eradicate the apartheid legacy. Radical change is needed, involving the overthrow of the (multi-racial) ruling class by the broad working class, collectivization, self-management and participatory planning, and a reign of economic and social equality and direct democracy.

Chapter 5:

The General Approach of Anarchists/Syndicalists to the United Front and NUMSA

by Jakes Factoria and
Tina Sizovuka (ZACF)

In this section we address questions that have been posed to ZACF militants. We are sharing these discussions because we think these are important and pertinent issues in Southern Africa. If you have questions you would us to address in our next issue, please get in touch!

In this column, comrade Themba Kotane, a union militant, asks:

? Will the United Front (UF) address the crises we are currently facing in South Africa? I am concerned about how the UF works and who leads it. In my own view we don't need a leader, we need to all have equal voice. How can we build the UF as a basis for a stateless, socialist, South Africa?

and had representatives from different political tendencies from (reformist) Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries to (revolutionary) anarchists and Bolsheviks. Through the soviets workers co-ordinated strikes and other forms of struggle, using them to govern themselves as a class. They were, in effect, united fronts organised from below by the working masses in pursuit of specific demands: food, land, democratic reforms and an end to the war.

In a few short weeks the Tsar, whose family had ruled Russia for generations, was forced to abdicate and a provisional government formed. The soviets developed alongside the liberal Provisional Government and a situation of dual-power emerged. Initially, the soviets supported the Provisional Government as a hesitant expression of workers' democratic aspirations but, as the war dragged on and the Provisional Government failed to implement even modest social reforms, discontent arose. Many workers and soldiers trusted the soviets more than the Provisional Government; but the new government was not strong enough to disband them.

Discontent and Reaction in August

The Provisional Government, headed by Kerensky, faced a crisis by the end of July. The growth of revolutionary ideas was fuelled by worsening economic conditions, unpopular government policies and peasant unrest.

The ruling class became unhappy with Kerensky's weak-kneed government. In August, the reactionary General Kornilov broke with the Provisional Government and plotted to establish himself at Russia's head by seizing Petrograd – the stronghold of the revolution. If the Kerensky government could not deal with the soviets he would do so himself.

Barricades and revolutionary defence committees were established by workers and soldiers spontaneously across Petrograd to defend their hard-won democratic advances from General Kornilov's forces. The Bolsheviks, like most other revolutionary currents, entered into these committees as a minority but played a prominent role in the Committee of Revolutionary Defence. They established Red Guard units and provided military training.

Bolshevik "Upswing" and Revolution in October

The coup, which was rightly seen as a reactionary attempt to crush the soviets, was defeated. The workers' victory shifted the balance of forces leftwards and Bolshevik support surged. Later, this "upswing" in Bolshevik support was attributed to their united front-style tactics.

According to this analysis, by participating in the front-lines of the struggle against Kornilov while maintaining their political independence, providing political leadership and not taking responsibility for the inadequacies of Kerensky's policies, the Bolsheviks won the majority over to their leadership. Faced with a common enemy different workers' parties were united in action and, both by supporting the (non-Communist) mass of workers' demands for land, peace and bread and by exposing their reformist leaders' inability to satisfy these demands, the Bolsheviks managed to win the majority to their programme.

Within two months, the Bolsheviks had led a revolution against the Provisional Government and established what appeared for a short while to be soviet power. This, for traditional Marxists, was the "great lesson" of the Russian Revolution.

Another Approach: Revolutionary and from Below

However, many leftists – including some prominent Bolsheviks – were critical of the Bolshevik approach to the struggle against Kerensky. The reformists believed that instead of dissolving the Constituent Assembly they should have formed a socialist united front government with other socialist parties – the Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks – which together had a majority, as the Constituent Assembly elections in November showed.

For them such a government, enjoying majority support, would bring peace and through the economic stability enabled by these conditions could gradually introduce socialist reforms from above. They said a Bolshevik-only government would lead to "a regime of terror and to the destruction of the revolution".

However, there was another revolutionary position – represented by the anarchists, syndicalists and communist left. This position held that the working class was already united in revolutionary action in February 1917. They argued that the soviets were already a majority and didn't need the support of the Provisional Government or Bolshevik leadership but, rather, could have built on the programme left it disoriented. Rather than providing revolutionary direction the KDP, interested only in bringing social democratic workers under its party leadership, consistently betrayed the revolutionary working class by reinforcing illusions in parliamentary activity and diverting workers away from insurrectionary struggle at times when the working class itself had effectively taken power and established democratic forms of working class self-administration.

Due to its isolation and divisions within the working class the 1923 uprising was soon defeated and the workers' movement was weakened beyond recovery.

A Revolutionary Alternative from Below

In opposition to the move to institutionalise – and thus control – the workers' council movement by drawing it into parliamentary activity there existed an alternative revolutionary position represented, particularly, by the council communist KAPD and the revolutionary syndicalists. These currents struggled against the ideas of party-rule and state control by attempting to put into practice concepts of the workers' council movement in pursuit of direct workers' self-determination. They acted as an extra-parliamentary opposition to the reformist and statist left parties and "educated people to act on their own political initiative, independently of any representatives".

Although the objective conditions existed for revolution the subjective conditions were not fully developed; the masses did not look forward to building a new socialist society but – influenced by the "workers" parties – back to the restoration of pre-war liberal capitalism and the completion of the reforms started before the war.

Thus, the clear revolutionary path desired by the so-called ultra-left (council communists, anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists) was not possible in light of the prevailing attitude of the mass of workers, who were still under the illusion – promoted by the "workers" parties – that their power lay in having "their" representatives in bourgeois democratic institutions and consistently divested the power they had effectively taken with the establishment of workers' councils to party representatives.

However, there was a minority that – wanting to replicate the role of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution – felt it was similar to the Bolshevik call, in 1917, for the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries to break with the bourgeoisie and form a united front government. The USPD, however, rejected the proposal and so it was never tested.

As with the November 1918 revolution the working class had conquered power again in 1920 without being conscious of it and, "had gone in its actions far beyond its explicit demands – and far beyond the consciousness it had of its own activity and desires. Now it had to decide whether to consolidate its new found power (i.e., create a genuine council system) or revert back to the realisation of its initial demands (i.e., peace, food, and parliamentary democracy)".

The mass of workers having effectively taken power through their councils failed to consolidate the gains made and effectively divested their power to party "representatives". Those revolutionaries that wanted to go further were shot down by the same army which had supported the rightist coup and to which the government, as it inevitably does, now turned for support.

The right, having reappeared on the political scene with the coup, shifted the political centre of gravity rightward and the SPD relinquished power in the June 1920 elections and in August the centrist parliament passed a "disarmament" law.

The Last Flicker of Hope, 1923

In the years following the abortive Kapp putsch there were numerous mass demonstrations and strikes around Germany, however parties like the KPD and SPD were able to capture the direction of these movements and lead them away from a revolutionary direction. The KPD consistently pushed workers' struggles away from insurrection and towards parliamentary activity under the instruction of Moscow; which didn't want to upset imperialist powers, such as England and France, and risk destabilising the Bolshevik regime until they had consolidated power.

The German working class last engaged in mass struggle on a national level in August, 1923, where workers spontaneously arose in response to increasing inflation and deteriorating living conditions. Workers' councils and armed defence committees were again established. The KPD's defensive implementation of a united front policy won them the support of a large number of SPD members, but its attempt to form an alliance with the right-wing around a national class confidence gained through Kornilov's defeat to dissolve the Provisional Government and truly disseminate all power to the soviets.

This position held that what was needed to advance the revolution was not centralised state power under the leadership of an all-powerful party, but the decentralised power of a federation of armed workers', peasants' and soldiers' soviets; a revolutionary united front from below.

The Bolshevik argument was that you couldn't have a revolution without Communist Party leadership because the working class would vacillate in its absence. However, there were in fact many episodes throughout 1917 where the working class was more revolutionary than the parties, Communist included. Many parties thus tailed the working class and even the Bolsheviks changed their programme to be more in line with the revolutionary working class – only to change it back once they had consolidated power.

While we will never know what would have happened had this alternative position triumphed, history has vindicated the argument against one-party Communist rule.

The next instalment in this series will look at another important episode in united working class struggle and its contribution to United Front policy – Germany in 1920-21.

Chapter 4:

United Working Class Action and the Workers' Council Movement in Germany, 1920-1923

by Jonathan Payn (ZACF)

Part 4 in a series of articles on the concept and history of the United Front.

A "revolutionary alternative from below" that was not quite to be but holds pertinent lessons for movements today.

In 1919, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) organised the suppression of workers that, together with soldiers, had overthrown the German imperial government in the 1918-1919 German Revolution and brought an end to the First World War. The SPD restored capitalist and state power but, despite being brutally repressed by the SPD, the German working class continued to struggle against the government until 1923.

Right-wing forces also wanted to oust the SPD-led government, recapture direct state control and reverse the results of the Revolution.

United action against the Kapp Putsch

In March, 1920, right-wing military forces occupied Germany's capital, Berlin, under the leadership of Wolfgang Kapp and the SPD-led government fled. All left parties, excluding the KPD (German Communist Party), called for a general strike to counter the coup and defend democracy. Soon, the strike had spread across the country.

Workers spontaneously organised an insurrectionary offensive, forming armed defence and strike committees to unite workers from different political tendencies and co-ordinate their actions.

This regrouping of the workers' movement in the form of workers' councils and action committees – which had been widespread during the 1918-1919 Revolution – united workers across political parties. The newly-formed "red army" was organised around three main geographical centres under the influence of the USPD (Independent Socialists); KPD and Left USPD; and revolutionary syndicalists and KPD left-wing respectively.

Facing nation-wide armed resistance and an insurrectionary general strike Kapp's forces gave up and fled Berlin, but the insurrection continued in pursuit of a new government. The three "workers" parties (SPD-USPD-KPD) did not support the workers' struggle for a new government and opposed workers' attempts to arm themselves and act independently.

Following the flight of Kapp's forces the central government returned to Berlin, called off the strike and attempted to form a "workers" government comprising the SPD, KPD and USPD. The KPD was divided over whether such a government could play a progressive role. The left-wing majority – which in April 1920 left to form the anti-parliamentary KAPD (Communist Workers' Party) – distrusted this government and said it would be similar to the SPD coalition government established after the 1918 uprising, which had brutally repressed workers and helped restore capitalist rule in the form of social democracy. They opposed a return to parliamentary activity because they believed that the workers' council movement had superseded parliamentary activity and that the call to return to parliament was a betrayal of the revolution. They said there was already a revolutionary situation in Germany at the end of 1918 and almost all left politics in 1919 took place in the workers' councils, not in parliament, and it was in fact the workers' faith in bourgeois democratic institutions – promoted by the "workers" parties in order to get themselves into power – that had led to the demobilisation of revolutionary workers.