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People's Power, Workers' Control & Grassroots Politics in South Africa:

Anarchist and Syndicalist
Perspectives on
Self-Organisation and
Anti-Apartheid
Resistance in
the 1980s



Lucien van der Walt, Sian Byrne, Nicole Ulrich,
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This pamphlet features three lightly edited transcripts of presentations at a workshop hosted by the International Labour Research & Information Group and the Orange Farm Human Rights Advice Centre in the Drieziek extension, Orange Farm squatter camp, south of Soweto, South Africa, on 24 June 2017. It was attended by a hall full of community and worker activists, including veterans of the big rebellions of the 1980s. ★

illustrated the potential for co-operation between trade unions, community based organisations, and other types- youth, cultural, sports – and unprecedented levels of solidarity. It showed mutual help projects, which created spaces of solidarity and communal support: soup kitchens, sewing collectives, community crèches, anti-crime patrols, defence units, and people’s courts.

The radical interpretation of democracy deserves special attention. In the 1980s, democratic practices, like mass meetings, the accountability of leaders and committees, were important, and people also saw democracy’s value to struggles.

Today, many of the principles of the self-organisation of the 1980s, and the very culture of radical, participatory and direct democracy, with its obligatory and absolute accountability of community leaders, with its special love for long and open meetings, are continued by some contemporary social movements in South Africa. I think that is the legacy of the 1980s, when many people believe that democracy is not an abstract idea, but rather a tool and practice, which must be used by the whole community.

operations, and a number of high-profile UDF figures, as well as activists like Mayekiso, were charged with treason.

The more intense the state repression, the worse the effect on the ability of people's power to be successful. The arrest of many of the most experienced leaders also led to structures of accountability being undermined and escalating clashes with the security forces by youth, leading to a militarisation of struggle and a decline in a broader community involvement.

But the apartheid state now knew that major reforms were needed. Efforts were made in the late 1980s to carry out reforms aimed at weakening the protest movement, and to reach out to the ANC. When the transition period started in 1990, the ANC leadership worked hard to establish its hegemony over the community and youth structures and the unions, with the UDF shut down in 1991, many of its affiliates absorbed into ANC wings or into ANC-aligned groups. When the ANC came into power in 1994 the days of "people's power" were gone, the movements of the 1980s co-opted or closed or sidelined. There was a process of depoliticisation and a move to focus on state power, with the ANC-led state meant to "deliver" to the citizens.

★ Some Lessons

It is important to note that not everything was perfect in the 1980s. There were power abuses, and important challenges to democratic practices. Some of the civics did not change leaders: this is explained by the domination of charismatic personalities, and, sometimes, the abuse of leadership positions. The fact that participation in any kind of resistance organisation ran the risk of being arrested and charged meant many people were not willing to take the risk of openly participating.

Civics faced challenges of gender and age inequalities: there was a generation gap between elder residents and the leaders of the civic associations consisted basically of youth, who sometimes imposed their will on the others. This could include using violence. There were tensions between civics and unions, in part because the unions wanted to ensure their autonomy and were wary of undemocratic practices in UDF-affiliated bodies. The ANC also exercised a growing influence behind the scenes, and ANC militants were often intolerant of non-ANC voices.

However, the period of mass self-organisation in the 1980s showed the possibilities of the people's self-organisation and self-rule from below. It



South African 'Workerism' in the 1980s: Learning from FOSATU's Radical Unionism

by Lucien van der Walt,
with Sian Byrne and Nicole Ulrich *

Thank you comrades for having me here. The Federation of South African Trade Unions is the focus of my talk. I want to look at what FOSATU stood for and what we can learn from FOSATU. When people remember it, they often label it as marked by "workerism," and they take that as a bad thing. But I want to show the so-called "workerism" of FOSATU was very radical, that this radical South African "workerism" is very important to understand, and build upon, today.

I want to stress, at the start, that what I speak about here rests very heavily, not just on my research, but the work of other comrades, notably Sian Byrne and Nicole Ulrich... Although they are not here in person, they are here as a key influence and inspiration and, in a sense, are my co-presenters in spirit.

Before there was the Congress of South African Trade Unions, today's COSATU, there was FOSATU. FOSATU was set up in 1979. There had been strikes and struggles in the 1970s, starting with a big strike wave in Namibia from 1971-1972, which was then a South African colony, then a big strike wave starting in Durban 1973, which spread around the country. Although we remember 1976 for the bravery of the youth and students, we must remember that the 1976 uprising also involved general strikes by the black working class, mass stay-aways.

And as the working class started to flex its muscles, and to organise new, independent unions, the need for unity was felt. In 1979, at Hammanskraal,

FOSATU was set up. The flag of FOSATU was red, black and gold, with a hammer, a spanner and a spade. FOSATU grew quickly, despite repression by the apartheid state. Leaders and activists in FOSATU were banned, jailed; some, like Andries Raditsela, were murdered by police. There was continual intimidation, and employers would fire workers for going on strike or “agitating” at work. Unemployment is not just about money: unemployment is a weapon of the bosses, and this weapon was used many times against FOSATU.

But, despite the pain, repression and suffering of the comrades in FOSATU, it got bigger and bigger, and stronger and stronger, and by 1985 it was the single biggest black working class organisation in the country. And not just the biggest, but in many ways, the strongest. It didn’t just exist in a moment of protest, or as a crowd that gathers around a grievance or in a crisis; it existed continuously, as a democratic, bottom-up machine that ran smoothly even when struggles died down. And it had 150,000 members, it had large education programs, it had a newspaper, it had choirs, it had successful strikes and campaigns, it had affiliates across the economy.

★ FOSATU’S “Workerism”

“Workerism” was a label that was painted onto FOSATU by those who did not like what FOSATU was doing. The people who gave it the label were not the racist National Party government, were not the police’s brutal Security Branch, but the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress. They denounced FOSATU repeatedly.

There was a simple reason: FOSATU refused to bow down to a political party, it did not trust the ANC and it did not like the SACP’s top-down politics. FOSATU said that control in FOSATU needed to be in the hands of the workers, and that change in the country had to be radical and benefit the working class, and that parties could not be trusted to do this.

So, the first thing about “workerism” – the main current in FOSATU, and its core politics –was its emphasis on building autonomous workers’ unions. What that meant was that trade unions needed to be free of outside control. They needed to be controlled by their members – the ordinary workers – and not controlled inside the union by a few leaders, and not controlled outside the union by political parties, by the bosses or by the government.

We must remember that in those days there were large so-called registered trade unions like the Trade Union Council of South Africa. In fact TUCSA was

the decision of boycotts would arise out of those meetings, from the grassroots.... ‘We’re not happy with the bus fares’... the decision to protest and to march is made there. If the committees can’t decide by themselves they have to send the idea at the general meeting, if it’s anonymous – it’s anonymous, or sometimes they vote. If it’s one who is opposed – it’ll be taken to a vote...

As protests grew, including attacks on state representatives, many areas became no-go areas for the police, and when the army was sent in, it faced resistance. The Black Local Authorities imposed by the apartheid government often collapsed, while councils in Coloured and Indian areas lacked credibility. In many places, organs of people’s power displaced the BLAs. In townships like Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, Suttner noted in a 2004 article, self-organisation reached a peak when “widely representative community elements took control of important aspects of township life and the fleeing of government officials left a vacuum, which the civic structures filled.”

This was the period in which street and civics started to run public services, when youth organisations created parks, and when people created self-defence and anti-crime patrols replaced the police in many areas. This understanding of struggle as self-empowering became central to anti-apartheid propaganda, and was articulated in slogans and concepts like “people’s power,” or “Amandla-Ngawethu.” These reflected the situation that was already happening on a mass scale. In 1986, when organs of people’s power had already emerged in many of the South African townships and when BLAs were falling, the exiled ANC leadership made its famous call for “ungovernability” and “people’s power.” The ANC in exile had recognized the strong potential and possibilities of self-organising, and hoped to use it for the purposes of the party.

★ The End of the Revolt

The apartheid state responded to the rebellions with repression, using extra-legal forces, such as vigilantes and hit squads, and the mobilisation of the army, expansion of the police, and the auxiliary forces of the homeland regimes. The second State of Emergency in 1986 led to the arrest of more than 20,000 people, and involved the largest repressive operation in the history of South Africa. Police and army violence, including in detention, was common, and by the end of 1986 the state had suppressed (or at least, greatly weakened), many community-based organisations. The UDF was severely restricted in its

Bricks explained:

...there are challenges facing your community that needs you and your child – everyone – to work together. We faced a lot of problems: houses, education, labour. Now we looked at the education problems, and we said we need parents to get involved into supporting our children at school, and fighting or demanding the education right for our children, and there were demands that were put forward. One of the demands was free education, and one department for free education for all, including blacks.

★ “People’s Power” Takes Over

The massive township struggles of 1984 to 1986 saw a huge growth in the power of the various organs of people’s power in the townships – block, yard and street committees; civics; student and youth groups; women’s associations; union structures based in neighbourhoods; education crisis committees – and massive de-stabilisation of apartheid local government. As Mayekiso noted, a focus on immediate problems led easily to an attack on the system as a whole:

The conditions that caused the formation of these organisations were bread and butter issues, but addressing these bread and butter issues automatically drives you to politics. “Why the streets are dirty? Why we are not getting houses?” So through these issues people got politicized and conscientised.

Effective township organisations, Mayekiso added, allowed extremely effective protest actions with high degrees of popular support. The formation of strong self-organised bodies made it possible to run massive campaigns:

...at the beginning, when people would meet in the garage or in an open space in someone’s yard, and in the streets openly, [they would] ... get trouble by the police. But people defied and met. Not only the structure itself, the committees, but the actual meetings were the organs of people’s power, including the structures themselves...

General meetings, firstly, is where the grassroots democracy belongs, it’s actual people’s power; that’s the main basic organ of people’s power, therefore the main decisions comes from there, like the boycotts:

bigger than FOSATU at one stage. But unions like TUCSA were sweet-heart unions, moderate, entangled into the state, run from above, and weak; they were racially segregated, largely excluding black Africans, and also treating their Coloured and Indian members badly.

FOSATU didn’t want to be anything like TUCSA. It wanted autonomy for the working class and poor, who were part of the working class. FOSATU wanted a union movement embracing all workers and under workers’ control. In reality, it was mainly black African in composition but it was strong in places where there was a large Coloured working class, for example Port Elizabeth and East London, and where there was a large Indian working class, for example Durban. In its search for the unity of the working class across race, FOSATU also tried to recruit white workers in the factories in Port Elizabeth, East Rand, the Vaal, but with little success.

★ Bottom-Up Industrial Unions

The second key part of FOSATU’s “workerism” was its stress on systematically building mass-based, bottom-up, profoundly democratic and fighting industrial unions. The idea was to organise industry by industry. So FOSATU would organise one union for the metal industry, one for textiles, one for chemicals and so on.

But rather than rely on laws or leaders, like TUCSA, FOSATU’s approach was to organise carefully, patiently. I call it the brick-by-brick approach that creates a mighty fortress. A good example was FOSATU’s Metal and Allied Workers Union, which was active in the ISCOR steel factories of the government, in the private sector car factories owned by multinationals, like Ford and Volkswagen, and in the metal and auto industry generally, much of it owned by local white capitalists.

FOSATU’s approach, illustrated by MAWU, was quite careful. It would set up a very clear program of action, targeting first a big factory, with, say, 4,000 workers: it’s easier to organise a big factory than a small factory. It would capture this base by forming a fighting union that raised demands and won them plus won “recognition agreements” (i.e. negotiating rights) with the bosses. From there, it sent out units to organise other factories nearby, including the smaller ones. Where needed, it would try and combine negotiations across factories, so that the smaller factories and union branches could be helped by the larger ones.

The idea is that you didn't just declare a campaign and make a demand, without an organised base, and without working class power to back it. You wage careful, sometimes slow, social war, factory by factory, workplace by workplace. Each that you win over is another fortress, another centre of working class power from which you can expand outwards. You don't make demands that you can't win and you don't drop a demand that you raise. So MAWU might demand, for example, equal wages across races, fight for it, even for two or three years, get a deal, also raise an issue around layoffs, fight, get a deal and so on. These were things that bosses did not want to give, they did not want to concede, but they had to be fought for, and they could be won.

Each struggle and each victory developed confidence, numbers and layers of militants, and made real gains for the working class. If you take the workers out into a battle that you can't win, you lose the larger war; you lose the workers because they are tired and weakened; you break their hearts and wills. And struggle is based fundamentally on the fire and strength of the heart and mind, the will, that power within yourself to keep going. So that is a precious resource and FOSATU understood that you needed to manage it carefully.

By 1982, FOSATU had built MAWU into a mass-based metal union, as well as other strong unions. It was confident that it could confront the employers in key sectors and firms as well as the state where needed, act regionally and nationally and not just at individual workplaces, consolidate the power of the union base, and carry out struggles based on directions from the shop floor.

FOSATU did not, let me stress, reject participation in the formal Industrial Council negotiating system of the state. Rather, it insisted that all agreements be directed by and checked by, the base, to prevent the hijacking and misuse of their demands.

★ Assemblies and Committees

That brings me to the third key part of FOSATU's "workerist" approach. What FOSATU stressed was that a union was not a head office or a service centre, but was based on the shop floor. So they organised based on regular mass meetings, or assemblies, that elected shop stewards, and gave them clear instructions, and made sure they reported back and acted against them if they did not. The idea was you wouldn't have unions based on officials from outside the workplace; as much as possible the workers would be the organisers, and officialdom would be kept in check. This would be carried out within each union, and also across the federation.

It was the pyramid structure. The people in the yard (because Alexandra is so overcrowded, there are about 4 houses in one yard, in one house you find there are 4 to 6 rooms, and in each room there is a family ... that's 4 times 8 number of people – sharing one tap, outside tap of water, sharing one toilet: you can imagine) ... would get together in one yard and create a yard committee to regulate living conditions, so that there will be no conflict in the yard. Also that yard committee comes together to create a block committee: you put many yards ... from that street and that street and that's the block committee. Then from block committee, there will be a street committee, then area committee – up to the civic. People would come together to elect their leader, every street, democratically raise their hand and people would decide on their leadership.

★ Media and Education

The 1970s and 1980s were also a time of a vibrant alternative press and media, which provided an alternative to the big business newspapers and the government-run broadcasting system. These helped share news, and ideas, and politics. For example, community-based newspapers such as *Speak* and *Grassroots* included numerous discussions about how to include more people into the decision-making process. Special study groups were launched by activists and community leaders in order to share knowledge on popular participation and democratic organisation.

Respondents interviewed also pointed to other structures that emerged to organise people and raise their grievances, sometimes at meetings at people's houses, and sometimes in public mass meetings. One such experience was shared by Bricks Mokolo, an activist in Orange Farm community, who started to get involved into the struggle in the late 1970s.

In 1985, Bricks was elected a chairperson of the Vaal Parents' Education Crisis Committee. Education crisis committees emerged as a response to the crisis in education, and drew in children and youth, as well as parents – and, where possible, teachers. It must be remembered that this was a time of massive revolts in black African, Coloured and Indian schools, as well as in the universities, and that youth – including school-leavers, the unemployed, and those who were not studying – played a massive role in committees and civics, as well as education struggles, and in the unions. Class boycotts were common, and youth were in the forefront of clashes with the authorities.

dominated by more educated people, fluent in English or Afrikaans, with some political background, these local committees centred on ordinary township residents, often without political experience or organising and facilitating skills. Like civics, these committees emerged in the late 1970s and proliferated in the 1980s.

In some cases, they were separate from the civics, and were more spontaneous local groups. The strongest and most democratic civics, however, were built on a solid foundation of yard, block and street committees. In these cases, the civic actually consisted of the committees operating in the township communities. One interesting example comes from Belville on the outskirts of Cape Town in the early 1980s, as reported in *Grassroots* newspaper:

The people of Belville realized that they needed a strong organisation to fight for their rights. This meant that the organisation had to represent everyone in Belville. So house meetings were held in all streets! And the people from each street elected a street representative. There are some of the duties of a street representative: 1. The street representative must know all the problems of the people in the street. 2. They must represent the needs of the street at representative committee meetings. 3. They must report all representative committee meetings to their street. 4. The representative committee is building unity in the area because it represents all the streets. 5. The street reps must not work alone, but with the help of all the people in the street. So the street rep is the link between the rep committee. In this way the people are working together to build a strong organisation.

Then the street representatives in Belville joined the larger Cape Areas Housing Action Committee, which covered a number of neighbourhoods and townships, and fought bad housing conditions. By coming together in CAHAC, people could share their experiences and find solutions to common problems and work together in common actions. And through street committees, set up by ordinary residents with mandated delegates, ordinary people could control the civic organisation.

Another remarkable example comes from Alexandra township in Johannesburg, which was a hotbed of struggle, where radical unionists from the FOSATU tradition played an important role. Moses Mayekiso, a metalworker from FOSATU and a leader of the Alexandra Action Committee, explained how the township was organised in the mid-1980s:

So, the leadership at all levels were to be delegates, kept on a tight leash, always accountable to regular meetings. The idea here was to build a union that was based on many, many layers of cadreship, militants – and a leadership generated and regenerated from below. Remember, in the apartheid days, horrors like the 2012 massacre at Marikana, which shocked us, were a regular occurrence; death, torture, mass imprisonment were the daily business of the old regime.

The advantage was that, if one layer got taken out, sent to jail, banned, killed, the union survived. It was not secure because the different parts were separate and independent from each other, like independent cells with sporadic links – but rather, because it was deeply rooted in the workers at the workplaces, with the workers unified through effective, democratic structures and procedures that renewed themselves, in tight unions and a tight federation. The idea was that of a mandated, multi-layer worker-leadership.

Some people now praise assemblies and workers' committees as an alternative to unions, but for FOSATU, the union and the federation centred on assemblies and workers' committees.

People who were hired by the FOSATU unions or federation for specialist jobs, like media work or full-time organising, but who were not elected, could not vote in the union structures. Anyone hired was to earn an ordinary worker's wage.

ANC and SACP enemies of FOSATU often claimed that “white intellectuals” were running it. And certainly FOSATU activists included people like Alec Erwin, a former university lecturer. But people like Erwin were a tiny minority in the union leadership; they served either in elected positions, and so were accountable, or in unelected non-voting positions, and so were contained. And most “intellectuals” in the union were black African or Coloured worker-intellectuals, like MAWU's Moses Mayekiso and FOSATU's Joe Foster.

★ Education, Identity, History

Fourth, FOSATU's “workerism” placed a heavy emphasis on building working class education, working class identity, working class culture and working class history.

To understand that the working class and its struggles come from and to learn from earlier struggles, and to remember and value them, FOSATU outlined the history of the working class. That the working class in South Africa comes from the older classes of slaves and servants, sailors and

soldiers. That the working class in South Africa is part of the working class of the whole world, with a common interest and struggle. That, in building a working class movement, we must understand where we come from, who are, to understand our struggles and recover our historical memory as a class, our pain and our victories.

In FOSATU Worker News, FOSATU outlined South African history from the perspective of the oppressed classes over three hundred years. It took a class line, attacking European colonialism and racism, but linking these to capitalism; and it drew attention to the role of African kings and chiefs in upholding oppression, including through slave-trading. Before FOSATU, there was the SA Congress of Trade Unions; before SACTU there was the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union; outside the unions there were movements like the slave revolts of the old Cape, unemployed movements, the anti-pass protests of the 1950s and 1910s, the squatter movements of the 1940s; and many more.

And FOSATU helped popularize and publicize this history – to celebrate it, but also to learn from past failures, such as how the ICU was destroyed by sloppy organising, unaccountable leaders and ineffective strategy. FOSATU also worked with the radical History Workshop of academics at the University of the Witwatersrand, participating in their conferences. In 1984, thousands of workers attended the conference, going to and presenting in seminars, learning, talking, making and enriching a history from below.

For FOSATU, we South Africans were part of the world's working class: a South African worker, a Russian worker, a worker in Brazil were of the same class, with the same enemies. You can have Coca-Cola, you have a Sprite, a Pepsi, but they are all fizzy soft drinks. You are exploited in South Korea, you are exploited in Brazil, and you are exploited in Poland: different flavours but the same stuff. FOSATU stressed that the problems that we faced in the 1980s were not only South African problems, they are global, and part of a global struggle. So FOSATU highlighted struggles in Zimbabwe, Poland and Britain, and it located the South African class struggle in a global history of struggle.

FOSATU made interventions in a range of areas. It ran worker choirs, culture days, and promoted images and slogans that stressed its messages. Similarly FOSATU developed materials for the youth, around women's issues, and engaged in a range of political and social areas.

Another respondent, Trevor Ngwane, who was active in the Jabavu branch of the Soweto Civic Association in the 1980s, remembered how this civic operated:

...we met in people's houses, we had one meeting a week... We would rotate, this time in this house, and this time in this... For example we would hold a meeting in a priest's place, because he's respected, or in a teacher's place, or in a trade unionist's house. And then there was no membership, and the issues we discussed were problems in the townships, the lights, we talked about the end of apartheid, we talked about children's education, or someone died, and they don't have anybody to bury him [about raising funds].

The call for such meetings was often made door-to-door, meeting the neighbours personally, or writing small notes and leaving them under the front door of the house.

★ Committees and Civics

The civics were, in short, residents' associations that dealt with the concerns of the people. They took different forms, but the typical civic had an executive committee, which comprised a chairperson, vice-chairperson, a secretary and a treasurer. The leaders would often be elected for three years, but they could be re-elected or recalled, upon the demand of the majority. The duty of the leaders was to report back to the communities in which they were based. A very important point is that the leaders were parts of these communities, facing the same problems as other residents. As Aunty Jane put it: "We were in the community fighting for the community," so "We can't as the leaders say to the community we want that or we demand that... they are using us and they tell us what to do." A culture of accountability was revealed itself in procedures during the meetings, in regular report-backs, and in continual communication with the residents.

The chairpersons' functions were basically those of co-ordination, calling meetings, and organisation and preparation for campaigns. The idea of leadership as "serving the community" went hand-in-hand with a sensitive and careful attitude towards the decision-making process.

Civics interacted in different ways with more localised forms of self-organisation like block, yard and street committees. Like the civics, these were formed to tackle specific problems, such as high rentals, poor electrification, bad housing, the bucket system and crime. In contrast to civics, where leadership tended to be

that, in many townships, there was little access to electricity, or to water in the home, sewerage systems often involved public toilets or the bucket system, and there were massive housing backlogs.

In this situation, women and children often played a key role in struggles. Even non-politicized housewives were easily mobilized into the struggle for local change. One example comes from the Valhalla Park Civic Association, which was formed by the residents of the Coloured township of Valhalla Park in the Western Cape to address evictions. Auntie Jane Roberts, who took part in this from 1984, told us that “we started to see what was happening to the people in the communities, and we decided as a community, ‘Okay, we gonna to be built up now.’” The Civic reconnected water and electricity that was cut off by the authorities, and put people back into the houses if they were evicted.

Another activist, Auntie Gertie, helped build the Valhalla Concerned Residents Association, after she was evicted, with her three little children. After she had some success in fighting evictions, she started to help others in her area. She told us her story of involvement in the struggle:

I grew up in poverty and I used to live here, and there, and all around. As my father was working, he wasn't able to look after me as a child; I had to go to school and I lived by one auntie, and then by another auntie, and so, I travelled around as a child. And at the age of, I think, 10-11 my father got married to another woman and ... then I went to live with the stepmother and she was [not] kind to me. I grew up, there was nobody I could have gone to and say, 'My [eye] is sore,' so I grew up very independently.... So I became very independent, do everything on my own. And in the 1980s, I became a single mother: I gave birth to my son and not married; and then a daughter, and then another daughter; and then I had three children. And I became a single mother then. And yes, there was nobody to go to: I just had to find my own way, with the little money I earn, I had to find my own way. Through that I've become into struggle.... I have been evicted by the City of Cape Town. Not twice but thrice. That is how I became involved in the civic organisation.

She continued:

There were three of us... We called people to the public meeting, and we spoke with the people and said we're forming this organisation named Concerned Residents, we are ... going to assist you – and who of you people is prepared to join us?

★ Beyond Wages, Beyond Workplaces

That brings me to the fifth element: contrary to what its enemies said, FOSATU “workerism” was never about ignoring politics or ignoring the world beyond the workplace.

At the workplace, FOSATU did not just raise issues around wages and conditions but other issues too. They recognized that women workers, especially black women workers, faced specific forms of oppression. They raised the need for crèches and childcare at work, and noted how women’s jobs and incomes and promotion and role in the unions was affected by the double burden: after the factory, the home. They campaigned for changes and equality. They spent time catching bosses who were sexually harassing women, setting up traps and catching them, and getting them fired or disciplined.

FOSATU positioned itself as the voice of black, Coloured and Indian workers in a racist, capitalist society. It fought the apartheid wage gap, within the same jobs and between different jobs; and racist pension and labour relations and on-site facilities systems; and tackled the authoritarian and racist workplace management system. It fought to make the workplace more democratic, more non-racial.

So FOSATU’s “workerism” wasn’t just about money, wasn’t just about bus fares, wasn’t just about pensions, it was about the working class’s struggle for dignity in the workplace, against racism in the factories – and also beyond the workplace. Because FOSATU did not stop at the workplace. It campaigned against oppression in the townships and the larger society, the oppression of the black and Coloured and Indian working class community.

It fought around the specific issues that some workers faced that others did not, from the perspective of solidarity and unity: besides the oppression of women, they spoke to the youth, to the unemployed, they put a lot of stress on the plight of migrant workers in the towns, and of the workers in the homelands or Bantustans. While unions like FOSATU were able to operate fairly openly in so-called “white” South Africa, homeland leaders like Lucas Mangope and Gatsha Buthelezi did not allow independent unions at all. FOSATU fought this, opposed the homeland system, and tried to break into them and organise unions.

So FOSATU wanted to become involved in township and other struggles, and extend the influence of the unions and organised workers into these spheres. Where possible, FOSATU entered into alliances or common work, especially through its shop-steward councils, which spanned the different FOSATU unions.

These brought together FOSATU workers from different FOSATU affiliates, who lived or worked in the same area. These councils could then engage directly with local community organisations, both as members and leaders in these, and through them bring the power of the unions to bear in their support. This could range from forcing employers to put pressure on bus companies, to infusing these structures with democratic practices drawn from the FOSATU tradition, and radical ideas drawn from that tradition.

FOSATU's politics also suggested that workers' control meant that workers, as the majority in the township communities, also had to have a large level of influence in those communities.

★ Alliances, Errors, Hesitancy

FOSATU was criticized, sometimes correctly, for being a bit too cautious in these engagements, and for not giving a greater lead. Sometimes it worked in parallel with other structures, rather than with them; sometimes it stayed away from campaigns; generally it avoided long-term alliances.

Part of this hesitation was because FOSATU was afraid of being swallowed by other groups. It believed, correctly, that many community-based anti-apartheid groups lacked stable democratic structures; that they were often run by the petty bourgeoisie, much of which was aligned to the ANC, SACP and other nationalists; and some engaged in political thuggery, including against FOSATU. FOSATU did not trust forces from outside the working class, and did not trust nationalism, which downplayed class differences by stressing common racial and national experiences.

In hindsight, it can be argued that they would have been much stronger and more influential by building long-term links and alliances – tragically, FOSATU stayed out of the United Democratic Front, formed in 1983, and lost the chance to build links with large, like-minded youth and community currents in the UDF. They did work with UDF at times, or support it, but in staying out, they also surrendered it to the nationalists and middle class.

But it is not correct to present FOSATU's "workerist" politics as narrow or bureaucratic. What FOSATU was doing was, in fact, carrying out its agenda, outlined at its 1982 congress in a position paper delivered by Joe Foster. This was that workers needed to be part of the "popular struggle" but to have their "own, powerful and effective organisation," "worker leadership" in the neighbourhoods, and forge a "working class movement" that went

participation of millions of South Africans in the process – a process which has already begun in the townships, factories and schools of our land," through the yard and street committees, civics, student groups, unions and other formations that had emerged.

As the 1980s progressed, this vision became a practice, both in daily struggles, and when, as we will see, some organisations involved in resistance started to replace the state with what were called "organs of people's power." In some cases, for example, street committees helped run public services, youth organisations created parks, and people created self-defence and anti-crime patrols.

★ Unions and Townships

It is necessary to identify the two most important prerequisites for the emergence of the UDF. First, from the middle of the 1970s, after the famous 1973 Durban strikes, the independent trade union movement was gaining serious strength: mass strikes and factory struggles took place in the country, workers established democratic control of their unions and created strike committees. The spread of the democratic culture and organising approach of these unions, especially the Federation of South African Trade Unions formed in 1979, played a major role in mobilizing ordinary people, and in enabling the development of so-called "organs of people's power" outside the workplace.

Secondly, in the townships where, since the late 1970s, there were conditions of socio-economic decline in the context of capitalist crisis, there was the emergence of new organisations in the forms of street committees and action committees and "civic" associations.

While the unions raised issues around wages, transport, racist treatment and so on at work, the new community structures' task was to fight for the everyday social needs of the residents: decent housing, lower rents, electricity, against evictions, etc. As with the unions, these struggles raised larger issues around the distribution of wealth and power; and, as with the unions, these structures enabled people to take more and more control over their daily lives, and to start to build a counter-power against the government – resisting the state, and sometimes later replacing some of its functions.

The socio-economic situation of township residents was very difficult. In conditions of growing unemployment, rising prices, and low-quality education and municipal services, and the under-development of the townships, issues like employment, housing and services were quite sharp. It must be remembered

disobedience, of consumer/ transport/ school boycotts, of strikes and stay-aways – or community-based general strikes. This dispersed resistance built on, and gave rise to, alternative practices of self-governance by ordinary people.

Secondly, a very important feature of that period was a democratisation of movements, and the birth of a radical democratic culture. This included changes at the personal level. It was in the 1980s that, for the first time, issues like gender inequality, of freedom of choice of a partner, and of domestic violence were openly raised on a wide scale, and when it became possible to openly oppose “traditional leaders” like chiefs and kings, something noted by analysts like Michael Neocosmos.

A major political event in that decade was the creation of the UDF as an umbrella structure capable of uniting a huge number of the already-existing organisations throughout the country, and of spurring more organising. The UDF was contested, but over time, it came to identify itself strongly with a radical vision of change.

A “People’s Democracy”

Leading UDF figure Morphe Morobe commented in a talk called “Towards a People’s Democracy” that a “democratic South Africa is one of the aims or goals of our struggle.” But he also made it clear that democracy is the means by which we conduct the struggle:

The creation of democratic means is for us as important as having democratic goals as our objective. Too often models of a future democratic South Africa are put forward which bear no relation to existing organisations, practices and traditions of political struggle in this country. What is possible in the future depends on what we are able to create and sustain now. A democratic South Africa will not be fashioned only after transference of political power to the majority has taken place.

The UDF outlined a much more radical vision of democracy than what South Africa ended up with in 1994. Morobe continued “Our democratic aim... is control over every aspect of our lives, and not just the right (important as it is) to vote for a central government every four to five years.” He stressed that “The creation of a democratic South Africa” was not something to be left for the future, or delivered from above; it “can only become a reality with the

beyond the unions. FOSATU understood that unions were not enough, that the project and power that was developing at workplaces also needed to extend the larger working class, and that unions should be only one part of the FOSATU project.

★ Expansive “Workers’ Control”

And this meant the need to strengthen the identity of the working class, to know where we fit into the capitalist system, to understand our power as the working class, and to understand that it is the working class alone who has the power to change society in a way that is fundamentally progressive.

So the notion that the FOSATU “workerist” politics was about being small and contained was completely wrong. There were contradictions and errors and hesitancy in FOSATU’s work, but it was never a moderate, narrow movement.

That brings me to the sixth element: FOSATU “workerism” involved dealing with issues beyond wages in the workplace, and also, it involved building beyond the workplace, but what was the aim?

It pointed to an expansion of worker control over the society and the economy as a whole, a new South Africa, in which the working class, the masses, were not just responding to what capital and the state were doing, but exercising real control. “Workers’ control,” at one level, meant workers control of the unions; but at another, it was a more radical vision of steady transformation.

This could build on steps like pushing back the frontier of control at work, for example, by having a growing input on decisions, but it would not end its steps there. A new South Africa had to be one in which capitalism and the profit system that exploited and oppressed the working class would be progressively removed.

Some of the workerists, like Mayekiso, argued clearly against the ANC slogan that “The People Must Govern,” asking: who are “the people”? Did they include capitalists? Homeland rulers?

“The people,” here, was rooted in the ANC’s nationalist politics, which downplayed class issues and aimed at a multi-class alliance of all democrats, rather than a class struggle of all working class people. The cost of that alliance, what made it possible, was retaining capitalism. But retaining capitalism meant retaining the exploitation of the majority.

In place of the ANC/SACP “Freedom Charter,” Mayekiso called for a Workers Charter, which would provide a basis for the workers to “take over and direct the whole” economy.

Elsewhere in Africa, independence brought positive reforms, but soon ended up captured by a nationalist elite that turned on the working class. FOSATU studied the case of neighbouring Zimbabwe very closely, noting that nationalists led by Robert Mugabe smashed up strikes and unions, and defended capitalism, soon after taking office.

Why would ANC be different? If there are workers at the bottom, whatever the colour of the president, who are suffering then there is no deep change. So Mayekiso insisted that the Freedom Charter was a “capitalist document,” rather than a program for “a change of the whole society.”

So what you can see here is a radical anti-capitalist class struggle politics. But at the same time, FOSATU distanced itself from the SACP, and through its support for workers’ struggles in Poland by the Solidarność union movement, also rejected the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its client states, because in these workers had no power.

★ Workers Power, National Liberation

This meant that the struggle against apartheid had to be linked to the struggle against apartheid. The ANC and SACP wanted to remove apartheid but follow it with a reformed capitalism, a first “stage” called the “national democratic revolution” or NDR. According to the SACP, this would later (somehow) be followed by a second “stage” of socialism.

FOSATU’s “workerism” did not just disagree with the SACP’s vision of what the second “stage” would be (a USSR-style dictatorship), but rejected splitting the anti-apartheid and the anti-capitalist struggles. Mayekiso insisted that “apartheid is an appendage and a branch of the whole thing – the tree of oppression of capitalism.” So it was not enough to defeat the son, apartheid, you had to defeat the father. Capitalism, Foster said, hid “behind the curtains of apartheid and racism,” but “capital and its lackeys were undoubtedly the major beneficiaries of apartheid.”

FOSATU argued against the NDR two-stage theory, which was being pushed in the UDF and in unions outside FOSATU and by ANC and SACP cells inside FOSATU. In Mayekiso’s words, there should not be “two stages” but “one stage continuous; this thing of two stages is a waste of time and a waste of blood.”

participants in the stories they tell. We conducted extensive interviews with active members of the communities, township residents, from those days. We hope to finish this project with a book, which will be a compilation of the interviews.

★ History From Below

The interviews that we collected shed light on very important local histories of the politicisation of, and resistance by, working class and poor people, against economic inequality and the oppression of the racist apartheid regime. We learned how ordinary township residents, not necessarily activists, but ordinary aunties and school pupils, mothers and grandmothers, and trade unionists, reclaimed power at the level of their yards, their blocks, their street, their zones, and eventually, of the whole township. We learned how new spaces based on a relatively horizontal distribution of power emerged, and what challenges this “horizontality” faced.

In addition to the interviews, we did work at two major archives of South Africa, which have collected material from the 1980s struggles. These are the Wits Historical Papers at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the South African History Archive next to the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg. We analysed original leaflets, brochures, minutes of meetings, posters and newspapers from the 1980s.

I am going to present some of this material today. The main question in our research was: Why social self-organisation by the working class and the poor in South Africa, based on the principles of equal distribution of power, and often with a very horizontal or flat structure, became an idea that could inspire masses around the country, and worked as a practice that helped dismantle apartheid?

I’d like to start with why we focused on the 1980s. We do so for two reasons.

First of all the 1980s was a crucial period in the anti-apartheid struggle, with mass resistance coupled to unprecedented levels of social and political self-organisation. That was the time when the “notions of ‘popular democracy,’ ‘people’s power,’ ‘self-empowerment,’ ‘democracy from below’ were all introduced as new ideas and practices into South African politics” (in the words of UDF veteran Raymond Suttner, in an interview).

A careful analysis of the 1980s in South Africa shows that the dismantling of the apartheid regime became possible because the process of resistance was dispersed through the whole country, through countless acts of local



Practices of Self-Organisation in South Africa: The Experience of the 1980s and its Implications for Contemporary Protest

by Daria Zelenova

The talk that I'm going to present today is based on a research project that I carried out with my colleague Vladislav Kruchinsky in South Africa in 2011-2013. The aim of our research was to analyse and explore the methods and practices of self-organisation from below that existed in the crucial 1980s period of the anti-apartheid struggle.

The vast majority of the material that's written about that period of struggle is devoted to the role of the large, institutionalised anti-apartheid forces, such as the United Democratic Front, an umbrella body for the community-based anti-apartheid organisations including church and sports groups, which was formed in 1983. A large part of it also focuses on the African National Congress, which is presented in the dominant narrative of the ANC as the leader of the anti-apartheid struggle.

My aim, with Vlad, was to look beyond these big organisations, and to focus on communities' struggles, viewed through ordinary people's stories. When we started our research, we understood that we wanted first-hand information, from the participants in the struggles. This is social history, meaning that it looks at the view from below, with the people interviewed themselves active

So it was crucial that the unions and the working class did not get captured or confused by existing white capital or emerging black capital.

★ Working Class Nation

FOSATU wanted one nation – but centred on the working class. It believed in a united South Africa: remember in those days, there was the Bantustan policy, the apartheid segregation in everything from jobs to toilets to schools, around 14 different parliaments for different races and homelands, different TV stations, different everything.

For FOSATU, these divisions had to be removed, as unjust, and as part of the working class struggle: the working class has many races, languages and cultures, but it had to be united around a common identity and aim.

A new South African nation needed to overcome the old divisions, including race, but be forged in struggle and based on justice and equality. Race was not the basis of inclusion or exclusion, but racial equality through radical changes in the cities, in the economy, in the society was essential. Here, majority rule meant working class power, and, of course, the majority of the class was black African, Coloured and Indian.

So the new nation would be non-racial, but it would be one in which the working class predominated. It would be driving the car, not fixing the car. It would be one in which the working class put its imprint on the nation. The culture of the nation would be that of the working class. The governance and power of the nation would be vested as much as possible in the working class.

It is sometimes argued that the choice is between national liberation (from apartheid) and workers' liberation (from capitalism), but FOSATU never set up such an empty choice: rather, real national liberation for the working class required workers power and anti-capitalism.

★ In Closing: Strengths & Weaknesses

I want to make three general points in closing. One, in many ways FOSATU was right. If we look at South Africa today, the poverty, powerlessness, injustice, if we look at how people like Cyril Ramaphosa – in his time, a hero of the working class, a union man, today a capitalist and a traitor – if we look at the ANC today, we have exactly the anti-worker outcome that FOSATU warned against.

FOSATU was right: when you get tied into the political parties, they take your best and brightest and corrupt them, they seek to capture the unions and smother them. FOSATU was right: the working class needs its own independent program, it needs to be anti-capitalist, its power needs to rest in working class mass organisations, not just in unions but communities and it cannot rest until capitalism is defeated by workers control.

But, in other ways, FOSATU was also wrong. FOSATU had a good criticism, a good daily practice and a vision of a good future. But at the level of a strategy linking what it did, in organising, educating and mobilising, and what it wanted in the end – that new South Africa it sought – there was no clear link. You can pack your bags for a trip to Cape Town, but unless you have got a plan to get there you are probably not going to get there.

In terms of a strategy linking the vision, linking workers' control today to a working class-centred new nation, linking present-day winnable demands to a massive shift in power and wealth, linking criticism of the nationalists to defeating the nationalists – FOSATU fell down.

Some parts of FOSATU were spending their time on court cases as part of a strategy to reshape the state; some parts were aiming at taking power: these are not the same thing. Some parts were working with the ANC quietly, some parts were saying to hell with the ANC. Some parts thought of the new South Africa as socialist, others as social democratic. All were vague on details. "Workerism" was not anarcho-syndicalism but a mixture of different ideas.

The "workerist" thinking in FOSATU wasn't developed enough. This was partly because of daily pressures and a stress on getting things done. But it was also because the "workerists" hadn't organised themselves into a specific group that could develop theory and strategy. They were a network, based in the unions, rather than a coherent group.

This also meant that, when the ANC and SACP began to build cells and secret cabals in the FOSATU unions, the workerists were not able to respond effectively. They needed to organise as a group in the unions, and outside the unions, including in the UDF, to plan and evaluate and strategise and intervene. Not just to clarify the problems in strategy, but to deal with other threats too.

People like Jacob Zuma, then the head of ANC secret intelligence, were directing ANC/SACP plans to capture the unions: they were skilled and they did not care about democracy. And they ended up winning.

When FOSATU joined with other unions in 1985 to form COSATU, it was the biggest and best-organised bloc, and the first COSATU resolutions had a deep

in 1994, the state is part of the capitalist system. It must, in the current period, implement neo-liberalism; it must, in all periods, promote the interests of the rich and powerful over the interests of the working class and poor. It ensures that the capitalist class can continue exploiting and oppressing the workers. Its top-down approach is completely at odds with real workers' control or "people's power." To get out of this mess, we have to build a powerful working class movement. If we are going to be able to build such a movement, then we need to go back to basics, back to what people were doing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and rebuild democratic, independent unions and working class organisations in the townships, rebuild workers' control and people's power by grappling with daily struggles.

That means engaging in and building movements that are able to actually win gains, that improve the conditions in the workplaces and the townships, and that can accumulate capacity to the point that they can start – as in the 1980s – to replace the existing system with control from below. A movement that fights to liberate the black working class – not with the intention of giving that power on a platter to someone else, but to use organs of workers' control and people's power to take back control of our lives and society, and to put the economy and the administration of the country under the control of the working class.

seemed to operate outside their experiences, where they didn't feel comfortable with the language and the tone, or felt that the movement was being led and dictated from outside.

NUMSA sees its United Front as a revival of the UDF process, with the United Front meant to link workplace and township struggles. But NUMSA has not yet done enough of the hard, patient work needed to build its credibility through participation in daily township struggles, reintegrating into these struggles.

Instead it has put its energies into calling for a new workers' party, while presenting itself as the vanguard of the whole working class. But what FOSATU and the UDF base showed was that you need to start small, in daily life, to build the basis for a countrywide movement.

NUMSA is skipping these vital steps, like other post-apartheid initiatives, and does not see, for example, the importance of issues like #GraveFeesMustFall; and it has also retained much of the old ANC framework of the NDR, with its focus on capturing the state. Unfortunately NUMSA has not gone back to its roots in the "workerist" FOSATU, which had kept the ANC at arm's length, and which rejected the NDR idea on the grounds that the struggle against apartheid had to be combined with the struggle against capitalism – and the grounds that nationalist movements betrayed the working class.

Whereas the ANC/Congress tradition said that the main political task was the transfer of state power from the whites to the majority, FOSATU went further to say you could only tackle racism if you tackled capitalism as well. This meant that the struggle against apartheid must at the same time be a struggle against capitalism, and that you needed strong, independent working class organisations – including worker-controlled unions – to do this.

In these ways, NUMSA has not really addressed the problem of the subjective conditions. Instead, it has actually been "trailing behind the masses," as many people in communities realized that the ANC was capitalist and neo-liberal 20 years ago: NUMSA, which thinks that it is the vanguard of the working class, has taken a long time to arrive at the same conclusion.

★ The Big Lesson

The focus on state power, championed by the ANC and its allies in the UDF leadership – and in sections of the unions, including the NUMSA leadership today – has led us to where we are now. But the state is an instrument of minority rule. Whether it is headed by a P.W. Botha in 1984, or Nelson Mandela

"workerist" imprint, including independence from parties. Within two years, they were gone as a serious force. Even MAWU, which became the heart of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa in 1987, ended up adopting the Freedom Charter and NDR, even if they gave this a radical interpretation. Jay Naidoo, a great activist but an ANC cadre, was one who worked inside FOSATU, and he helped forge the defeat of "workerism" in COSATU.

★ Tomorrow, Today

Third, in closing, let us remember something key from FOSATU: the idea that tomorrow is built today, that, as MAWU said, learn from the past, act in the present, to build the future. What we do now shapes what we get tomorrow – you cannot take a tree that is growing, cut it down, take off the bark, take off the leaves and use as a kerie, or club, and then put it back in the ground and think that it is going to be a tree. You cannot build an undemocratic organisation and think it will become democratic. You cannot raise your dog to bite people and then be surprised when it bites people.

If we want a democratic, worker-controlled society, FOSATU understood, you need democratic unions and a democratic working class movement. If you want a society beyond capitalism you need clear ideas of how to get there and you need to practice what you preach. The ANC in exile was a top-down structure, it was run from the top by men like Zuma and Thabo Mbeki, top-down. When the ANC was unbanned, the exiled ANC took over and systematically undermined the best of the democratic traditions of the UDF, which it soon disbanded, and of COSATU, which it has systematically penetrated. It did not have democratic traditions or tolerate opponents then, and there should be no surprise that it is undemocratic and intolerant now.

- ★ Lucien van der Walt delivered the talk, but it is based on joint work with Sian Byrne and Nicole Ulrich. See Sian Byrne, Nicole Ulrich and Lucien van der Walt, 2017, "Red, Black and Gold: FOSATU, South African 'Workerism,' 'Syndicalism' and the Nation," in Edward Webster and Karin Pampillas (eds.), *The Unresolved National Question in South Africa: Left Thinking Under Apartheid*. Wits University Press.



Lessons from the 1984-85 Vaal Uprising for Rebuilding a United Front of Communities and Workers Today

by Jonathan Payn

Comrades, the talk I am giving is based on a paper that I have written. The paper is a work in progress. I am hoping that, through the discussions we will have, you will give me some direction. I can see some of the dots that can be connected, but I am missing some. The written paper is called “Asinamali! Rebuilding a united front of communities and workers: #GraveFeesMustFall, neoliberalism and the 1984-1985 Vaal Uprising.” It’s a big title but we’ll unpack it.

When we talk about people’s power we are not thinking about putting our leaders into the very same structures. We do not want Nelson Mandela to be the state President in the same kind of parliament as Botha. We do not want Walter Sisulu to be Chairperson of a Capitalist Anglo-American corporation.

So said a United Democratic Front pamphlet called “Building People’s Power” that was produced in the 1980s. It continued, “We are struggling for a different system where power is no longer in the hands of the rich and powerful. We are struggling for a government that we will all vote for.” The UDF, formed in 1983, was a coalition of anti-apartheid community, church, worker, youth, sports and other groups. Along with forces like the “workerist” Federation of South African Trade Unions it played a key role in resistance.

The UDF leadership then started to theorize “people’s power.” But the leadership was responding after the fact, since the practice was already developing. Because the UDF leadership was often aligned to the ANC, it theorised “people’s power” in a way that fitted it into the ANC’s nationalist project. So, while they were trying to understand what was happening on the ground, they also sought to bring the UDF base back under the control of the UDF leadership, and also tried to link “people’s power” to the ANC’s NDR project.

For example, the UDF leadership insisted: “we do not want to tie organisations down in the endless supply of services if it means they forget the main task of the political struggle.” But then they defined the “main task of the political struggle” as the capture of state power, by the ANC. This wasn’t necessarily the “main task” as defined by the people on the ground, when they set up “people’s power” in the first place. And the UDF leadership completely ignored the basic contradiction between a project of building “workers’ control” and “people’s power” from below, with the daily participation of the masses, and of mass movements and local structures; and the project of state power, which is power from above, in the hands of a few, and of parties, which excludes the masses.

★ The “NUMSA Moment”?

By the end of the 1980s, the ANC had come to play a central role in the struggle, and this included it taking over the struggle from unions and community movements. And with this, the projects of workers’ control and “people’s power” were deeply undermined. When the ANC was unbanned in 1990, it quickly closed down the UDF, and strengthened its grip on the unions. After it was installed in government in 1994, it then carried on with the neo-liberal project and did its best to prevent protests.

Since then, there have been many efforts to rebuild a mass working class protest movement – one that could tackle the ANC government – but mostly without success. The most recent is the United Front, started by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, which broke its ties with the ANC in 2013. So far, all of these efforts have foundered. Why? And what can we learn from the 1980s about what is needed to rebuild a mass movement?

One of the problems has been the tendency to forget what the 1970s and 1980s showed: you do not start a movement with grand declarations, but with people’s daily struggles, like around wages or rents or corrupt municipal officials, and then you move from there to the bigger issues. It is clear from the 1980s that a lot of ordinary working class people didn’t get involved in movements that

became more democratic, because people were organising street by street by street, organising street committees and block committees and so on, because they couldn't have mass community meetings anymore.

So the practice of "people's power" was shaped by the increased repression, and, as the UDF said, the proliferation and growing role of organs of people's power could be seen as a "positive growth out of a defensive measure." The UDF noted, for example, "the development of people's clinics in several townships": "in setting up people's clinics, and in training comrades in basic first aid skills we are also beginning to plant the seeds of a new society."

They went on, "We must be clear that we do not aspire at this stage to erect a completely alternative health structure. The medical facilities, the big hospitals, and the clinics that do exist in our country should belong to all." So, do not just build people's clinics on the margins, but also build the power to take control of the major clinics and hospitals and so on that already existed.

This raised a complex strategic issue:

Should our people's organisations take responsibility for running crèches in our townships? Or should we put pressure on the government to supply crèches? When local administration collapses, should our organisations take responsibility for refuse removal? Or should we demand that the state resumes the service? When people's organisations run soup kitchens ... are they forgetting the struggle and becoming charity organisations?

The UDF answered: "the removal of rubbish, or the supply of soup kitchens or crèches is neither reformist or progressive in itself. It depends on the concrete situation and the way in which these actions are combined with other activities. The supplying of crèches or of soup must never become an end in itself."

★ Subordinating "People's Power"

So, people began to build organised power outside and against the apartheid state. The idea of workers' control was central to FOSATU, and people's power, to the mass base of the UDF, and in both cases, there were moves to expand these to take more power, as "the seeds of a new society." In fact, the central UDF structures, which were dominated by the black middle class, were left behind. It was the ordinary people who started doing this first, and the UDF's national secretary, Popo Molefe, admitted that the UDF was caught "trailing behind the masses."

What the UDF wanted sounds like almost the exact opposite of what actually happened: more than 20 years later, it is not Sisulu who is chairperson of Anglo-American Corporation, but the ANC's Cyril Ramaphosa, the Butcher of Marikana, who is a shareholder on the capitalist Lonmin Corporation. Even though people have the right to vote now, fewer and fewer people are actually voting because they don't get what they vote for; and power and wealth are still in the hands of the rich and powerful.

What went wrong, and what lessons we can draw? What are some of the similarities between the 1980s and today? What is the way forward?

★ The Vaal Uprising, 1984

Conditions in the townships for the black working class in the 1980s were very similar to the conditions today. Starting in the late 1970s and into the '80s, the economy was in a recession. If we look at the Vaal, there had been a slump in the steel industry, so there had been mass retrenchments at ISCOR, the old state steel company, which had a large plant in the Vaal. This has since been privatised and is now Arcelor-Mittal. The conditions in the townships, which were already bad, because of the racist policies of separate development between the black townships and white suburbs, were getting worse and worse. There was a deepening education crisis that had been exposed in 1976, and black youth were not happy with the quality of education that they were receiving, with racism in the schools and so on. There was a severe housing crisis as well. The government was not building nearly enough of the houses that were required in the urban townships.

And, to top it off, starting in the late 1970s, the local government dealing with black African townships – the Black Local Authorities and the Bantu Administration Board – started increasing rents and charges for services like electricity and water included in the rent. In July 1984, the Lekota town council announced that there would be a rent increase in the Vaal. The Vaal Civic Association, which was affiliated to the UDF, started organising an anti-rent campaign throughout August, and, on the 2nd of September 1984, the different representatives from different committees that were part of the VCA met at the Roman Catholic Church to plan for a stay-away, or community-based general strike, the next day, Monday 3rd September.

That fateful day workers responded to the VCA call for a stay-away. Students responded, there were protest marches and so on and, as some of you comrades will recall, the police opened fire on marchers, and the situation exploded.

People started to fight back and what started here, in the Vaal, on the 3rd of September, had within a matter of months spread across the country, beginning the 1984-85 township uprising.

People organised themselves, as they had already been organising for some time, and they made the townships ungovernable: the BLAs began to crumble, they didn't have any authority in the townships, and neither did the larger apartheid state. Some areas were made no-go zones for the state, and people started to take control of the townships and to take back control of their lives.

★ #GraveFeesMustFall

That was part of the beginning of the end for the apartheid system. What started on the 3rd September contributed directly to the collapse of apartheid. But more than 30 years after the Vaal Uprising began, here in the very same region in the Vaal, people have found it essential to start organising against another rates increase, this time imposed by the post-apartheid government: grave fee increases.

Starting last year, people have organised against increases in the cost of municipal plots to bury their relatives. I am sure comrades have heard – it has been talked about on community radio, and you have heard about the #GraveFeesMustFall campaign, or been involved – the cost of a plot went from between R400 to R600, to over R1,000. And that is only if you get buried in your municipality of residence. If you get buried outside your municipality, it is even more expensive. Because municipal cemeteries are getting full, sometimes you either have to resort to “reopening,” where they bury someone on top of an old grave, or you have to get buried at another municipality. But if you get buried elsewhere, costs are huge. So, say for example, that you lived here in Orange Farm, in the City of Johannesburg municipality, but the local cemeteries are full, then you have to go to another municipality to be buried, and your family gets charged up to R4,000.

When we ask why the grave fees have become so expensive, there are two main reasons. First, it seems that the ruling party, the African National Congress, and the state, are selling land to private individuals to profit by opening private cemeteries. Second, local government is using every opportunity to squeeze more money out of working class and poor residents.

If the cemeteries are getting full, then surely the government needs to make more land available for graves instead of privatising them. What we need are cheap

They did it in workplaces where they started organising democratic trade unions, based on the factory floor; democratic worker-controlled unions workers built in struggles, which led to FOSATU. This was a way for workers to try and get more control over their lives, including in the workplace, and a means to fight exploitation and oppression. The aim was seen as “workers’ control.”

FOSATU became the hub of this approach.

And in the townships, people did the same thing, through structures like street committees, civics, clinics, crèches, student groups, women’s groups. Like the new unions, these engaged with a range of issues, and were usually built by focusing on immediate issues that affected working class and poor people. So these were involved in fighting evictions and putting people back in their houses, in campaigning against rent increases and the cost of busses, and things like that. This is what the VCA was all about. By focusing on these immediate issues, and by winning small victories, and by linking the immediate problems people faced to the bigger situation in the country, of racist rule and capitalist exploitation, they were able to build strong democratic organisations and conscientise people.

So, when the Vaal Uprising happened, there was already a relatively high level of organisation amongst the working class, with people organising to try and reclaim power and some control over their lives. The UDF became the hub of this approach.

When the Vaal Uprising happened, people took this self-organisation to another level: the BLAs collapsed in many areas, and many townships were made into no-go areas for the apartheid state. People started to move from this situation of “ungovernability,” to what was called “people’s power,” where ordinary people started to administer the neighbourhoods through “organs of people’s power.”

This could involve street committees, or removing sewerage, or taking control of sanitation, or trying to restructure education, or building “people’s parks,” or “people’s education,” or anti-crime patrols, which were taking over the function of the police from the state and making sure that people were not engaging in anti-social behaviour, drastically reducing rape and murder and violence. In some cases, this involved “people’s courts,” to deal with people that infringed on other people’s rights, and committed anti-social acts.

As the UDF noted, the risings starting in 1984 were met with massive repression, including successive States of Emergency, and this meant you couldn’t have the big mass rallies, community meetings and things like that. This pushed people to organise on a more local level, and this often meant that the organisations

But today, despite massive suffering, and sporadic and wide-spread protests, developments like #GraveFeesMustFall, conditions have not pushed people over the edge, or led to big campaigns, higher and sustained levels of struggle, or a unification of the different protests countrywide.

Why not? The reason lies in what we call the “subjective conditions”: the level of organisation and consciousness of the black working class in the townships (and in the workplaces) are not as developed now, as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. So although the urban working class and even the unions, are bigger than ever before, they are not as powerful and active as before.

One reason is that for at least 30 years the black working class has been under attack, firstly by neo-liberalism, which has tried to make the working class pay for the economic crisis, and which has gutted movements and unions and deepened divisions, and secondly, by nationalism.

The working class has been ideologically and organisationally attacked by nationalism.

What do I mean by “nationalism”? Nationalism is the idea that all people in a nation – regardless of class – need to unite to win state power, through a formation, a nationalist party. This thinking is at the heart of the ANC, as well as the rival nationalist parties.

Nationalism defines the political task as building a party that can capture the state. The state can then, supposedly, liberate the oppressed nation. Meanwhile, divisions in the nation, such as between rich and poor, need to be hushed up.

For the ANC in the 1970s and 1980s, this meant that all movements, including the UDF and FOSATU, were seen simply as ways to build the ANC, which would carry out a so-called stage of National Democratic Revolution. The NDR would be capitalism under black majority rule. Later (some hoped) this would be followed by a second “stage,” a transition to socialism. The core social base of ANC nationalism lay in the black middle class and educated black intelligentsia.

★ “People’s Power” and the UDF

But the nationalist project involved undermining what people on the ground were actually doing. From the 1970s, people started organising themselves on a massive scale. They knew, as the UDF stated, that “the Apartheid state doesn’t represent us and have our interests at heart,” and they rejected the BLAs and other cosmetic reforms; they organised to have more control over their lives.

affordable grave sites, and yet these are getting privatised or commercialised to make a profit. This shows where the government’s priorities lie.

★ Urban Neo-Liberalism

The problem is linked to the capitalist system of neo-liberalism, which is affecting us, in every part of our lives. Privatising, commercialising and raising service charges, which is what the #GraveFeesMustFall campaign is fighting, brings us up against the problem of neo-liberalism, and how this links to the legacy of apartheid.

It is important to understand what neo-liberalism involves. It is about privatisation, commercialisation, outsourcing, rising service charges, more cut-offs, flexible jobs – and removing all barriers to profit-making at the expense of the working class and poor.

Starting in the 1970s, the economy internationally, and also in South Africa went into crisis. The bosses were not making enough money, they were losing profitability, and one of the ways that the government tried to get profitability back for the capitalists and bosses from the 1970s, was to use neo-liberalism.

Neo-liberalism is enforced by states, allied with big companies. It is embraced by the ANC today, but did not start with it. It started with the racist National Party government, which moved in the 1970s in the neo-liberal direction. It cut its social spending on things like education, healthcare, service delivery and so on, and started making local governments raise more of their own money within the municipal area. So instead of the national treasury giving enough money to municipalities, local government needed to find ways to raise money itself to be able to function. This meant charging more and spending less, and ensuring cost-recovery, meaning recovering money spent on things.

★ The NP and the Townships

Obviously this approach hits the black working class hardest, whether under the ANC or the NP. So, in the 1970s, when the apartheid state introduced the BLAs, and allowed black Africans to vote for local councillors in the BLAs, it also made the BLAs have to raise their own money for development in those townships, from those same voters.

One of the main ways that municipalities raise money is by charging businesses, corporations and property owners taxes, based on the value of their property. Another key way is to charge them for electricity, water and so on. So, when the apartheid state introduced the BLAs, they insisted the BLAs raise most of their own money.

As you can still see in the townships, there weren't a lot of businesses, there were no big corporations or workplaces, and property was not worth a lot. The townships exist, mainly, as reservoirs of cheap labour, neglected by the state. So the BLAs could not get a lot of money through taxing properties in the townships, unlike, for example, in rich areas like Sandton, where there are a lot of big corporations, as well as the hub of the economy, the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. The apartheid white municipality for Sandton could cope with falling money from central government quite easily, by raising property taxes and service charges, on the companies and the JSE and on wealthy residents. This caused some complaints, but no crisis.

But the BLAs, based in poor and under-developed areas, with a mainly working class and poor population, did not have these options. So they raised rents. This caused massive unrest, and sparked the Vaal Uprising, which sparked the township insurrections of the mid-1980s.

The end of the NP and the apartheid regime, brought some important changes, including the end of the BLAs and the merger of black African, Coloured, Indian and white local government into unified municipalities. The formal segregation was ended.

★ The ANC and Townships

But the new ANC government did not end neo-liberalism. Instead, its reforms are all framed by neo-liberalism. So, the ANC soon started doing the same thing as the NP when dealing with the townships. Local government had to raise a large part of its own money; the amount of money from the national treasury that goes to local government has actually been cut drastically in the last 20 years.

The result is that local governments, like the City of Johannesburg, raise money and cut costs by privatising or commercialising services like electricity and water, by casualising and retrenching workers, by raising charges and cutting people off if they do not pay. Raising grave fees in the Vaal is just another way for the municipalities to try raise more revenue, and another way to try create space for business to make profits.

neo-liberalism works by increasing specific charges, how much you pay for electricity and water – and now, for graves.

Other conditions are also very similar between then and now. We know that there is still a big crisis in the education system, as we have seen with the Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall campaigns: black students are not happy with the content and quality of education, and with the fact that it is not affordable. Government funding cuts to universities have led to massive increases in fees, which exclude black working class students, as well as to outsourcing, which attacks the workers.

We still have a massive housing crisis in this country, despite government building low-cost “RDP” housing. At the beginning of May 2017, there were big protests in black African and Coloured townships in the south of Johannesburg like Freedom Park, Ennerdale and in the Vaal, around housing, because the government is simply not building enough houses to end the apartheid backlog or deal with the ongoing growth of the towns.

On top of that, there are massive evictions going on in places like the Vaal. What made rent so key to the BLAs was the fact that a very large section of township houses were actually state-owned. As far as possible, the apartheid state wanted to prevent blacks having urban property, rather keeping them on leases. So the BLAs could squeeze people for rent, and evict non-payers.

Many of these municipal houses have since been quietly privatised, and many have ended up in the hands of banks, with many people are now paying off bonds to banks. With all the other costs going up, with the rising unemployment and low and stagnating wages, all associated with the cheap black labour system inherited from apartheid, and deepened by neo-liberalism, many can't afford to pay their bonds anymore. With people defaulting on their bonds, they are facing evictions.

So, the problem of the townships is not solved, but continues.

★ The Subjective Factor

The objective conditions of the 1970s and 1980s, just before the Vaal Uprising, and those of today are very similar, but we are not seeing a massive rebellion today. Rent increases in 1984 were the last straw, they pushed people over the edge – to say, “We can't take it anymore! We can't afford to pay more for rent, we are starving and we can't afford it” – and to a social explosion.



UDF UNITES - APARTHEID DIVIDES



But there is not enough money raised, even with these methods, so the townships remain poor and under-developed. This continues the legacy of apartheid's separate development, with its divide between the suburbs and the townships, which can be seen in everything from streetlights to roads to housing.

This is one of the main injustices that people were fighting against in the townships in the 1970s and 1980s. The old apartheid urban policies don't exist on paper anymore, but current neo-liberal policies have the same effect.

Because what happens is that the City of Johannesburg, for example, generates a lot of revenue in Sandton, in Rosebank, in the wealthier old white suburbs, and that money gets invested back into the same areas to develop them, to maintain them, to keep them clean and things like that. But Orange Farm, for example, which is also part of the City of Johannesburg municipality, is a township and a squatter camp, and the municipality can't raise a lot of money here and so, it does not spend a lot of money here.

So the legacy of separate development continues. The money raised by the municipality in the historically (and still mainly) white suburbs stays there, while not enough money is raised in the historically (and still mainly working class and poor) townships to develop these areas, and reverse the legacy of separate development.

★ The Past in the Present

Other objective conditions are very similar today, to what they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Starting in 2008, the global economy started going into crisis again. The thing about capitalism is that it is full of crises, and the system doesn't really work smoothly, it is not stable. Every couple of years it goes into crisis, whereby the bosses are not making enough money and the governments lose out on tax, and so they need to find ways to increase profitability.

What they do is that they cut wages, they retrench people and they try to make the working class and the poor pay for the crisis, by shifting the cost of the crisis onto the backs of the working class. They are trying to make the workers and the poor, in South Africa the black African and Coloured working class especially, pay for the capitalist crisis in order to increase the incomes of the bosses and politicians and the ruling class.

Since the 1970s this has involved neo-liberalism. From the 1970s, urban neo-liberalism by the BLAs worked by increasing the rent. From the 1990s, urban



Mass United Democratic Front meeting

