

Who's winning the power battle - the rulers or the ruled?

THE SLOGAN of People's Power has captured the imagination of millions.

This is not surprising in a country where the vast majority of the people are denied access to power.

Wherever people interact there is power. Groups and individuals may have more power than others because of age, sex, race, organisation, wealth, consciousness, information, access to law and government and many more.

But there is more to power than these differences. Power is the ability to assert and defend class interests against opposing classes.

This involves power and control over every aspect of life - at work, at school, where one lives, local and national government structures, the army, police, courts and prisons, the media, the church, banks, financial institutions and the whole economy.

Democratic control means participating in decision-making, formulating policy and programmes of action — and implementing and administering them.

But not everybody can be part of every structure, so people mandate others to represent their interests and be accountable to them.

To exercise power, people need strong organisation to gain the upper hand over opposing classes.

The balance of power never stays the same. Organisations have had to work out how to keep the power they have won and how to win more. They have had to adapt to changing conditions of struggle and use the strategies and tactics which will advance their interests.

'People' in the slogan 'people's power', refers to groups of people with common grievances and problems, needs and aspirations. The most fundamental of these is their class position — this determines people's place and role in society.

Struggles between competing classes underlie the way society is structured and the way it is changing. Within this, people belong to civic, student, youth and other organisations which take up their common problems and pursue common interests.

Underlying these are class interests. For example, most people can't afford to pay rent because workers earn poverty wages. The battle for houses and security will only be won when people control housing allocation, the means of production and can share in the wealth they produce.

The current balance of forces in SA is a delicate one. The apartheid government has been challenged and shaken and their ideology is in tatters.

Businessmen, bureaucrats, the army and the police agree there are problems. But they have different ideas about what should be done and where they want SA to go.

Their confusion is about how to solve their own problems without destroying their beloved profits and letting go of political control.

The confusion of the government and the bosses opens up new possibilities for struggle. To do this organisations have the task of building and strengthening themselves on every front, and consolidating and defending past gains.

People's struggles around different issues have thrown up organisations which will be most effective

in waging those struggles.

So people form SRCs in the schools, trade unions in the factories, civics in the townships. Some struggles have needed new types of organisation — like the front against the apartheid constitution, or the campaign for the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, the consumer boycott committees, education crisis committees.

These constituency-based and campaign-oriented organisations have developed rapidly since the 1977 clampdown — and have survived many attacks since then.

As conditions of struggle and the balance of class forces change constantly, so do forms of organisation.

Local organisations have dealt with day-to-day needs and problems of a specific sector of the community. Without these, no other organisation can really be effective as it is here where people become directly involved.

These organisations are the most accessible, based as they are in the factories, schools and communities

where people spend much of their lives.

They are trying to bring as many people as possible into organisation, so they can be marshalled and deployed strategically. With a clear analysis and programme, more people have gained experience and understanding.

Many groups have been signing up members to ensure a more organised base than just supporters. Members can vote in elections for office-bearers and take part in drawing up policy, strategy and tactics. Representatives then operate on the basis of mandates received from their members, and are accountable to them.

By adopting this system of participative democracy, organisations have been able to deepen their relationship with their constituency. And they have been able to do more than just take up daily problems. This has been an experience in democracy and organisation which will form the basis of future society.

In the last two years the system has

been attacked head on. People have faced armed might with bare hands, they won't retreat. But activists have learnt that mobilisation and action are not enough. These tactics alone won't defeat the bosses and the government.

Struggles on different fronts, like the schools or the communities, are essential to transform society. They are challenging the methods and means of control.

But each organisation's ability to do this is limited by its scope and mandate, as well as by its strength and preparedness.

Students play a major role in our struggle. But their main concern is the education front. The same goes for trade unions — their first responsibility is to defend the interests of its members at their place of work.

But students and workers problems are rooted in the same Apartheid and capitalist system. So both need to challenge this system at the same time as they fight their immediate battles over textbooks and wages.

If they unite in some overall co-ordinating structure, their activities can be combined and extended. And action against the bosses and their government can be on a much wider front.

The pattern of struggle over the last five years has been one where issues erupt in one constituency. Then they quickly spill over into others, until the entire community is involved in a full-scale confrontation with the security forces.

Some areas have had activity involving all constituencies and organisations eg. student, factory, community, women etc.

But generally, solid structures to take up struggles that go beyond just one sector of the community are still lacking.

These can take advantage of spontaneous outbursts of action that sweep the entire community along, as well as develop systematic programmes where all these groups take part.

Rent and consumer boycotts, stay-aways, have been most effective when run by structures coordinating organisations from all sectors of the community. These organisations also had the mandate and base to make the campaigns effective.

Building constituency and campaign-based organisation, and linking this in co-ordinating structures, provides the means for the people to win power. Through these organisations people can fight for their interests against classes which seek to deny them power. This is bringing democracy to the people.

Democratic organs of power have developed along geographical, rather than constituency lines eg. street, block and area committees that include residents, workers, youth, students, women etc.

They have had to work out the tasks and jurisdiction of each sub-structure and how they relate to each other, from street committee level onwards.

These structures are bringing people into a level of struggle that is already happening — but not yet on a structured and strategic basis.

They cater for political training — organisationally and in developing political consciousness. Seminars and study groups have been organised and political schools could even be established.

An important part of all this is the creation of a progressive political culture or style. This would overcome problems of inexperienced and untrained activists exercising authority and leadership in an undisciplined manner.

The organs of people's democracy cannot afford to be accused of abusing power or of using unprogressive methods.

By emulating the type of behaviour and style of advanced activists and learning from them, less experienced activists have developed and become a credit to the progressive movement. In Cuba a 35 point checklist was circulated as the basis for an intensive six month campaign of emulation.

Law 1269 in Cuba, says the organs of peoples power are "empowered to conduct the business of government, manage economic units, undertake new construction and repairs and, in general, develop those activities required to fulfill the social, economic, cultural, recreational, and educational needs of the community."

