

'Engaged in Debate and Struggle'

National Forum Convenor Saths Cooper and publicity secretary Lusiba Mtloko spoke to SUSAN BROWN about the NF's structure and operations, and its perceptions of the UDF.

What is the National Forum - an event or an organisation?

The NF is an alliance of organisations of the left, which are all socialist. There is no other common factor. It is not an affiliate structure. A wide range of allied groups attend the forums we hold at least twice a year. They are occasions for analysis and taking ideological positions: one forum produced the first complete internal response to the Nkomati Accord, for example.

At the first national forum in 1983, a wide range of opposition tendencies was represented for the first time, from Black Consciousness and Africanism to workerists and Charterists. This diversity remains: the NF now has Black Consciousness groups like AZAPO; Africanist groups like Azanian National Youth Unity; extreme class-analysis positions like that of the Western Cape Youth League; and non-racialism as represented by some Cape Action League affiliates. There are groups which place the nationalist struggle above the class struggle, and there are labour groupings as well. The Azanian Manifesto sets out the principles of this alliance.

Ultimately, the NF is not an organisation, but a forum - by our nature we must assume organisational limits to our activities. There have been calls for the NF as such to undertake co-ordinated action, but it cannot be done because of our alliance nature.

What are the NF's present relations with the UDF?

The March 1985 national forum in Durban was the first at which no

representatives of UDF affiliates were present. The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) meeting on the same weekend, which the UDF hierarchy attended, did not fall on the same days as the forum.

The reason the UDF stayed away this time was, we think, its leaders' belief in its exclusive authority, its sole representativeness and its general push for hegemony. UDF leaders see themselves as in a state of internecine warfare, an attitude which has led to the violations of democracy exemplified by violent attacks on AZAPO, particularly in the Eastern Cape.

This attitude represents a misunderstanding of the democratic process - people in South Africa have for so long been victims of lack of democracy that they regard anything but collective conformity to a line with suspicion. When groups which share many of the same aims do speak up in debate, suspicion arises. But the NF does not believe in a one-party approach; its genesis and basis is non-sectarian.

What is your evidence for these criticisms of the UDF?

A major recent instance: the NF, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and various student, community and educational bodies' representatives initiated the preliminary meeting on 11 December which resulted in the Wits education crisis conference at the end of December last year.

In trying to co-operate with UDF bodies there, we found throughout that, when it came to the question of organisational representation, non-UDF bodies were under pressure: our numbers of delegates were eroded, decisions were

taken in our absence without our being notified of the meetings, and in one case when a meeting was called, none of the UDF organisations showed up. At Wits, motions already passed had their wording quietly altered. Continual violations of even formal democracy were constant in an effort to control and exclude any but UDF interests.

The Easter national forum resolved to attend the NECC meeting collectively to present our objections - but when we learned that delegates had been attacked by Inkatha impis, we changed our minds and stated our solidarity instead, since we did not want our challenge to be identified with Inkatha's attack.

If your accusations about UDF practices are accurate, why should an outsider not see NF and UDF leadership as intellectual groups competing for constituencies and power?

Our tendencies are very different from those of the UDF. We reject the coercive conformity of much of the UDF's practice, and base ourselves on the right to review and criticise. We feel it is positive, for instance, that the Azanian Manifesto may be changed and developed, rather than remaining rigidly static.

Other than rhetorically, how does the NF differ from the UDF?

Our practice is essentially different: it is socialist in principle. Full democratic participation in all joint decisions is basic. That is why we hold the regular forums. And the right to criticise leadership is inherent - something the UDF claims but does not permit. We have no secret cabals which take decisions behind closed doors to impose on constituencies, as they do.

The NF central structure does not intervene in the activities of its local organisations in the way the UDF top hierarchy does. We supported the national May Day call because we were asked by our constituents to do so, but regional programmes will differ as local organisations decide. We believe that local organisations need to be strengthened in their operations rather than weakened by dominance from the centre.

The NF central structure is designed to provide theoretical input, to enable analytical conclusions to be hammered

out and agreement reached on minimum programmes for local organisations to undertake. If representatives of NF constituent organisations cannot agree on policy at a forum, the issue will fall away, though this has not happened to date. We take concerted action only when consensus has been reached. Our detractors often refer to us as a loose alliance, meaning an insignificant one. But we are loose only in the sense that we are democratic.

Our decisions are taken in open public debate. At the last forum, for example, we agreed to discuss the national crisis, and local groups put forward specific issues for the agenda. Issues then raised were those of the national convention, education and disinvestment. For example, once Action Youth put forward May Day action as an issue for forum discussion, various NF area committees sounded out constituent organisations. They are all notified of the agenda - on paper if possible, by telephone if time is short. But representatives at the forum itself cannot lobby for a draft resolution before the debate, because that would be undemocratic.

Recently the NF seems to have tried to offer an olive branch to the UDF.

We never severed relations with the UDF. But we hold to the right to criticise their or anyone's practice and principles, in order to crystallise those areas that we have in common, and in the process of joint action, to develop a basis for unity in struggle.

We see the outcome of this as particularly urgent now, after more than a year of internecine black-on-black violence. Our interest in unity or co-operation is not because we see ourselves as being sidelined; unlike the UDF we have not striven to maintain a high media profile, with national publicity campaigns around the issues we undertake. We prefer the publicity to go to the credit of organisations in the field.

What is your attitude to the proliferation of local-level street and area committees and people's courts, often run by UDF affiliates?

We support development of strong people's organisations, whatever their affiliation, as long as they do not

serve the ruling class. But we are dubious of coercive measures which weaken the image of resistance in the communities. Rather than force, there should be a process of conscientisation. Popular leaders are supposed to be representative, and if they use coercive tactics it lessens the appeal of the struggle among the masses. Activists should not make people lose hope and faith in the harbingers of freedom.

What does socialism mean to the wide range of NF organisations which espouse it?

We have no models, in that we do not espouse the Soviet or Chinese or any other existing system, though other struggles may provide pointers. Rather we see the move towards socialism as a process of dealing with specific local problems and issues on a principled basis. Because the NF is coherent as to its goal, it can tolerate differences in approach, tactics and strategy.

The NF is often accused of being dominated by intellectuals, and as such cut off from the grassroots.

Many of our leaders, like the UDF's, are intellectuals. The issue is whether they represent the interests of their constituencies, especially working-class interests. People like the Council of Unions of SA's Phiroshaw Camay and the Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions' Pandelani Nefolovhodwe are in a sense intellectuals, but represent workers' interests.

The question is not so much the class origins of activists, as the structure within which we operate, and the degree to which it furthers an alternative South Africa. For example, in a number of cases where NF officials have been criticised by grassroots membership, they have been dumped, and indeed some left voluntarily. Officials are accountable and recallable.

What then do you mean by your repeated assertion of the importance of working class leadership?

Intellectuals can maintain working-class leadership, when they are strongly linked to a working-class constituency and act only on a real mandate. It is possible to have organisations with predominantly working-class membership

which do not express basic working-class interests - Inkatha's union, UWUSA, is an example. While the majority of its members will be workers, it will nonetheless work for capitalism.

But is it not Stalinist to assume that a group of activists may be more accurately attuned to workers' real interests than workers themselves?

You would not be able to get a worker to say that it is right that he be exploited to make a boss rich. But any group can be manipulated against its interests, and that is why it is so important to allow the real interests of our constituency to emerge through open debate and democratic structures.

We are engaged in practical education work to instill socialist consciousness, working with student representative councils and parent-teacher associations. We are active in support work for unions. It is not our job to provide worker education as such, that is for the unions, but we contribute to cultural events, and of course have members involved in union organisation. Our labour connections are not limited to CUSA and AZACTU, though in the prevailing climate others avoid unequivocally aligning themselves with us.

We have black students' study projects, and the Cape Action League is active in high schools with its affiliate, Students of Young Azania. AZASM has its Black Students' Study Project. We are concerned with developing alternative education as well, though hampered by limited resources, since we get no outside funds.

Our programmes are not just discussions and workshops. We also undertake house visits, to find out what is uppermost on people's minds. If rent is an issue, we canvass people's opinions - rather than telling them: 'Our leaders say you must boycott'. In the last couple of years stayaway and boycott tactics have been overused and sometimes abused. Such calls may be forced on communities with no thought of the strain on people's resources in terms of jobs, money and safety. And with coercive measures to ensure conformity, there is no openness to alternative suggestions.

But what of your call for action on and after May Day and between 16 and 26 June?

This is not a call for boycott, but rather a call for local organisations to undertake concerted action within their existing programmes for those periods. We do not believe it will collapse the state - it is a long march to social change. Action cannot always be at peak intensity; that is why a period of strongly focused activity is a way of highlighting the power of the people, and at least affecting the government power base. In those periods, we want organisations, NF and outsiders, to get together to seek unity and cohesiveness.

With its stress on theoretical and analytical inputs, it could appear that the NF conceives itself as a vanguard party.

It is a perception that can easily arise, and perhaps that is why the Charterists feel threatened. But we do not have the organisational structure to constitute ourselves as a vanguard party. Realistically, we are limited to acting as a catalyst on principled activists to bring people together.

We cannot say that in the course of time some kind of vanguard organisation might not evolve from the NF, but we cherish no ambitions to claim authority as a sole representative of the people. If a new vanguard socialist party were to emerge which encompassed the principles in the Azanian Manifesto, we would be overjoyed.

Surely the stress the NF lays on conscientising contradicts its socialist position, in that it implies an idealist rather than a materialist approach?

Conscientisation is not a matter of theoretical input only, but involves

practical action and a challenge to existing social relations. We have programmes that follow through during the intervals between forums. Certainly we stress the need to raise people's consciousness - especially when the alternative is coercion - to enable them to perceive the best strategy needed to realise their objective interests. But our programmes and organisations have a real and material existence. We are concerned to combine theory and action, rather than to have action without principle.

It is unfair to see the NF as engaged merely in debate without involvement in struggle and action. And in fact, if our constituent groups are not practically active, why are they subject to attacks from competing groups? It is fear. And that is why other groups are reluctant to share a platform with us in debate as well.

The Easter forum produced a pungent denunciation of a national convention. But why do you consider the issue a live one at present?

That forum dealt with aspects of the national crisis, specifically considering the issue of a national convention, which we perceive to be a centrist tactic to hijack the struggle. Mandela himself is on record saying that the time for a national convention has passed.

But people like Van Zyl Slabbert are now seeking to re-establish credibility in resistance circles. Such operators, we believe, hope to make inroads to dictate the structure of the struggle, to skew it towards being merely an anti-apartheid issue. We feel the point of departure for the struggle must be fundamentally anti-exploitation and anti-capitalist. The Botha reforms could result in a national convention sellout, and this must be guarded against.

ORGANISATIONS PARTICIPATING IN THE NF**

Major constituents

Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO): claimed membership, 110 000; 103 branches in Northern, Central, Southern and Western Transvaal, Vaal, East Rand, Border, Eastern, Northern and Western Cape and Natal.

Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (AZACTU): claimed total membership of 11 union affiliates, 95 000; based mainly in Transvaal, Northern and Eastern Cape.

