

Interview with Johnny Issel, key UDF Western Cape leader, 2003

On the 20th anniversary of one of South Africa's most significant political developments, the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF), Johnny Issel, who led the organisation of that historic event, speaks of his experiences. Interviewer's words are in bold.

You and Trevor Manuel represented the Western Cape at the meeting to decide where the launch of the UDF would be held. That was one month before the actual launch. What was the atmosphere like when the two of you arrived in Johannesburg?

The mood among politicians in Jo'burg over that weekend was quite festive. On that Friday banning orders, imposed in terms of the Communism Act, were lifted. So, everybody was celebrating.

... except the one on you and a few others? ...

Yes, I was one of the ten people to be banned again. So, many of those whose banning orders were lifted, seemed to have converged on Jo'burg that Friday. From the airport we were driven to Lenasia where the festivities were quite noticeable. At Lenasia some of those present started harassing me for the views held in Cape Town about the launch of the Indian Congress in the Transvaal earlier that year. Despite my attempts to explain the strong views against ethnic organisation, there was an arrogance which appeared a bit suspect. Those present were fully aware that by then the ANC flag had been raised quite successfully at huge gatherings in the Cape.

After a while we were driven to what seemed like an industrial area to meet in some kind of warehouse. This all appeared so conspiratorial. In Cape Town, we had advanced beyond this stage and it would have been no problem to secure a comfortable meeting place with the necessary security precautions in place. Being in Jo'burg in the middle of winter and the prospect of a long meeting was not very comforting. I remembered Hadley King's remark on the venue where we met to discuss the idea of forming the united front: "All the demands of the Freedom Charter are met in this house."

You were meeting to decide where the launch would be held?

Yes, we were going to discuss where the launch would take place.

... who was at this meeting?

I had thought there were going to be a lot of people but there were only a few. There was Pravin Gordhan and Yunus Mohamed from Durban, Jabu Ngwenya and Amos

Masondo from Soweto, Ismail Momoniat and Valli Moosa from Jo'burg, Trevor and I, and perhaps one or two others.

A number of issues related to the UDF had to be discussed, from the colours to the city which would host the launch. When discussing the colours, Amos proposed grey. A long silence ensued. Then somebody proposed the German colours, without calling it such: black, red and yellow. Everybody seemed in agreement and we moved to the important matter of where the launch should be held.

Right at the start it became clear that Cape Town was not going to be considered for the launch. That opinion seemed unanimous. The comrades argued that the meeting should be held in Durban. If there were problems in having it in Durban, then Johannesburg should be considered. If for some reason it could not be held in Johannesburg, then Port Elizabeth should be the last option. Having the launch in Cape Town would be too risky because of the many factions, they argued.

I was, somehow, taken aback by this attitude. I could still hear Leila Patel and Zubeida Jaffer and others, who had come to see us off at the airport, shouting after us to bring the launch to Cape Town. But little did I realise what a long night it was going to be.

Trevor and I tried to dissuade those present but it seemed they had made up their minds. Cape Town was going to be too risky for such an important event. The discussion dragged on until very late into the night. Most of it centred on why the meeting could not be held in Cape Town. By then many of those present had fallen asleep including my co-delegate.

But I had decided that the case for the launch in Cape Town could not be abandoned. I outlined, ad nauseam, the structures we had created in Cape Town, the various campaigns around which we had mobilised, the many comrades who were in full-time employ within various structures and in different communities. Then, in a desperate attempt, I offered to work fulltime on the launch. That, somehow, seemed to sway the others - perhaps more out of tiredness. And when asked whether I could guarantee an attendance of at least six thousand people at the launch, I said: "Yes" - Cape Town had won the launch.

Were there political factions in Cape Town at the time?

Yes indeed. But in no way could this militate against the successful staging of such an important event.

A number of political tendencies seemed to surface during 1980 when we saw an upsurge in mass action. The people were ready for direct political action against the state. A protracted bus boycott ensued. Communities were coming out in support of various worker struggles. Civic protests proliferated, like the one in Mitchells Plain against electricity penalties. With this surfaced a number of political groupings - all very eager to hoist their separate flags.

There were three major groups on the left. One such group positioned itself at the leadership of the emerging independent trade union movement and held a critical position towards the ANC. Then there were the remnants of the old Unity Movement. Their base was within the non-racial sports movement, a few civic organisations and the municipal workers union. The largest, by far, were those who pledged allegiance to the Congress Movement. They were quite amorphous at the beginning but found greater cohesiveness from the time of Hennie Ferrus' funeral.

Tensions in the Congress group were around tactical rather than ideological differences: an example being whether ANC symbols should be displayed at public gatherings. Later tensions were around the popularization of the ANC and recruitment into the armed struggle. These, however, were never of an antagonistic nature. The political culture at the time allowed for differing opinions. Nobody felt threatened by holding a different view. So, when the forces were called to work for the launch, all were united in a single unit.

Whilst there was co-operation amongst these left groups on a number of campaigns, bitter tensions surfaced at the time of the UDF launch. The biggest setback came from individuals in control of the trade unions in the Cape. Prior to the UDF, we would not hesitate to rally those we could influence to support the struggles of the workers in these unions. They argued, however, that the formation of the UDF was going to compromise the struggle of the workers.

Those associated with the Unity Movement organised a counter meeting on the same day of the launch. It was their stock response, a tactic they had used so many times in the past to counter an initiative of the oppressed. So much so, that when the state produced misinformation that the launch had been postponed and attached their name to those pamphlets, they refused to deny that the pamphlets were theirs. Many of those same individuals, from the trade unions and the Unity Movement, today occupy very senior positions in our new government.

So what awaited you on your return when people learned that the launch was taking place in Cape Town?

Well, we had already phoned the news through the day after the meeting. So when I arrived back everybody knew. Everybody was overjoyed. However, I had an outstanding matter to sort out on my return. The security police had been looking for me for a few days before we left for Jo'burg. I suspected that I was going to be one of the ten people in the country to be banned again. Colonel Griebenhaught, who was in charge of the security police, was leading the search for me. I phoned Griebenhaught and informed him that I was on my way to Caledon Square. On my way there I picked up Percy Sonn, whom I could trust to keep the 'boere' in check. The police were visibly relieved when we arrived. I think I was equally relieved because, with them off my back, the work for the launch could start in all earnestness.

Why Rocklands? For what reason was this important gathering held in Rocklands?

Finding a venue was very critical. The date for the launch had been set at the meeting in Jo'burg. And we had only four weeks to organise. So, as soon as I arrived from Jo'Burg, I worked on finding a venue. I looked at the Good Hope Centre but found it quite cold. It was also not available.

Mitchells Plain, somehow, always intrigued me. I had spent much of my time testing different kinds of organisation in the Plain. I felt a strong affinity with the people of Mitchells Plain, particularly with the Rocklands community. They had often protected me against police harassment and even against some political detractors. I had also been the first chairman of the Rocklands Civic Association. The association had an official relationship with the municipality and thereby had easy access to the local civic hall. The Rocklands civic hall was not the best suitable venue for such an important gathering but we just had to make it pass...

... you got into trouble with this choice?

That was the last drama in the whole process. Scores of heavily armed policemen in a convoy of kwela-kwela trucks stormed the meeting. But that story goes back a few days before the historic event. We realised that the hall was not going to be big enough but could not change the venue. It was highly illegal to hold a gathering in the open. We could not give the boere the slightest chance to move against the meeting. So a plan had to be found. The only way out was to erect a huge tent. But to put up such a tent we had to dig holes in the tarred road. The municipality, very likely under pressure from some quarters, refused to give us this permission. We then approached Eulalie Stott, a very nice, liberal lady on the council, who arranged this.

And as the meeting was taking place, I was manning the control centre at Shahida's house in Rocklands. I had a direct line to the hall and to the two control centres of the CB groups who had helped us bring the busses into Mitchells Plain. As the meeting neared the end, I heard from the CB group in Heideveld that the convoy was rushing down Duinefontein Road. I contacted the hall and instructed that as many of the lawyers present - and there were many from all over the country - should confront the convoy. I insisted that no word of the convoy should be made known to the meeting. The police, on their arrival, were adamant that the meeting was taking place in the open in contravention of the law. After some persuasive arguments from the lawyers, the policemen left.

Where did the idea of a United Front come from?

The idea to build a united front against apartheid was proposed by Allan Boesak at the meeting in Lenasia during January earlier that year. The idea of a united front was also bandied by communists during the last World War when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union. This was a rather expedient response from the communists. Shortly before that

Stalin had made a pact with Hitler who was preparing to attack Poland. When Hitler turned against the Soviet Union, after having overrun Poland, the communists, who had earlier called for neutrality in the War, needed to save face. Hence the call for a united front against Hitler.

At the Cape, however, the building of a broad front against apartheid took shape from the late seventies, as a critique of the elitist position of the Black Consciousness Movement. Formations and organisation spanned across social classes. So, when the idea to build a broad front within the country was proposed, much of the work had already started at the Cape. The UDF undoubtedly enhanced this process tremendously.

The UDF launch was a great feat! Did you expect it to be something of this magnitude?

Before answering that question let me first pay tribute to the scores and scores of comrades who worked so selflessly when the call was made. These comrades came from all walks. There were workers and professionals. Students and unemployed. Housewives and academics. Revolutionaries and clerics. One of our songs said: “die hondjies en die katjies” (doggies and cats) were also in the struggle - all united in opposition to the sham apartheid constitutional proposals.

The circumstances under which they had to work were neither always comfortable nor very pleasant. There were times when they had to endure all sorts of harassment and intimidation from the security forces and the police. And essential resources were limited.

I recall one such activist, he was May Prins, who has passed on, a street preacher by trade who could hardly read when we found him in Rocklands. He excelled as overall co-ordinator for the dissemination of publications during the launch.

Without the tireless efforts of those comrades, both young and not so young, these achievements would never have been possible. Over the years I was often given the task to enthuse the mass before a campaign and, similarly, with the launch of the UDF. During the launch, often at dawn at some station where workers were boarding the train or late at night in an obscure community, I would observe these activists, resolutely engaged in accomplishing the task they were assigned to, never resting until the task was done.

Though we had limited time of less than one month to organise the launch, with such commitment, I was confident that the event was going to be a success. We had a number of advantages like a wide-ranging number of well-rooted organisational structures and a large and divergent repertoire of organisational know-how. Success was never in doubt.

The magnitude of the launch, however, did surprise me as it did many others. But again my organisational experience over the years had been to improve on our past experience. That was how we managed to capture the hearts and minds of the masses. I have to admit, though, that the extent to which the UDF launch went beyond all past events did surprise me.

What were some other surprises?

One of the achievements was the large corps of activists who were taken through some very specialised organisational experiences. That was critical for the many campaigns which would follow. The proliferation of these experiences, gained during the launch, was a tremendous advantage during later years when conditions became fairly repressive.

Then there were a number of organisational tactics which we tried and perfected during the launch. One such tactic was crowd control or marshalling as we called it. I took a bit of a personal interest in this matter. We attempted to perform this task in a quasi-military manner. The marshalling was really effective, so much so that with the “burial” of the UDF, many years later, one comrade on a public stage referred to me as having been the chief-marshall during the launch. This skill became very useful during the many marches we had to organise in the years ahead of us.

The biggest surprise for me was the impact that the launch had on the mass of the people. And not merely the people of the Cape Peninsula but the people in the rural areas. And particularly the coloured people within the rural areas. It left a big lump in my throat when I observed coloured people in these areas finding their voice through the UDF - at a time when ‘baas’ was still very much ‘baas’ in these areas. The UDF for them was a means through which they could say to the white man that his days were numbered. “UDFers” they called themselves in unprecedented defiance.

Over the years the racists were always particularly concerned about political developments in the coloured community. They took great care in crafting a specific and favoured dispensation for the coloured people, particularly here in the Western Cape. But the coming of the UDF put a stop to these designs. Later, there was not even a chance of a coloured delegation at CODESA.

And the link between the UDF and the ANC was well known. It was therefore not surprising that barely two and a half years after the launch of the UDF they entered into talks with Mandela.

What broad areas of work had to be performed in preparation of the launch?

There was, firstly, the launch with its myriad of tasks which had to be undertaken. Secondly, we had to constitute a Regional UDF Council. This was quite difficult because we were struggling to get certain groups, particularly, the Trade Unions, into the Front. More importantly, the UDF was about politics. We organised numerous workshops with

a large number of groups to expose the sham constitutional proposals of the apartheid government. Then there was another important aspect of the work: the regular Gumbas. This happened on a nightly basis culminating in the main UDF Concert. This was held in the Hanover Park Civic. Our very best musical artists, such as Basil Coetzee and Robbie Jansen, performed.

Returning to the launch. It must have been a logistical nightmare to handle so many people coming into Cape Town with all modes of transport at different times. How was that all managed?

Logistics is based on effective communications. In this regard we were quite lucky. At that time there was a certain fad amongst young motorists in Cape Town. That was long before cell phones. These motorists were organised into groups with their cars fitted with CB long-distance communication systems. They were linked to a base station in some area on the Flats. We decided to approach them. And to our surprise they were very willing to help. We had arrangements with two of these groups. One was based in Heideveld and the other in Kensington. From early the Friday morning they were all over the Peninsula and on the N1 near Paarl. With their assistance we brought all these vehicles safely into Mitchells Plain where most of the delegates were staying.

Were there any novel organisational aspects with the launch?

The ability to produce media, in many different forms, was one of our strengths. Media was critical because there was always the risk that the other side might publish some counter media to mess up our efforts. Therefore we could take no chances. They did try some of their tricks and confiscated an entire publication as we got off Paarl Post's press in Paarl on the eve of the launch. However, other printing presses, which we had laid our hands on, were churning out publications elsewhere.

But we needed some of audio media. And we decided to produce our own with the song Buffalo Soldier, which was hitting the charts at the time, in the background. The voices of Kay Jaffer and Mike Evans were styled in the way Radio Moscow used to read their news bulletins.

Then the painting of graffiti was highly effective. It provided quite a kick to those who were attracted to more conspiratorial activities.

Particular care had to be taken with nurturing the ecumenical movement where work had started some time before the idea of the UDF. We also got the Muslim community more closely linked to us. In fact, it was during the preparations of the UDF launch that Call of Islam was born.

The UDF covered the entire Peninsula. What about the rural areas?

Through Grassroots, our civic movement, youth and women structures, we were able to reach every nook and corner of the Peninsula. At the time of the launch, however, we

were still quite thin in the rural areas. The Boland areas were activated quite early on and there were many detentions as early as 1980. After the death of comrade Hennie in 1981, Worcester was solidly ours. And through our show of force at his funeral, the fear for the white man in the town seemed to have vanished.

For a long time we had our eyes on the South Cape because it was by far the most strategic part of the rural areas. Consolidation in this part could only be achieved after the launch. Through the intervention of Grassroots, we established SAAMSTAAN (stand together) to act a bit like the Iskra in the South Cape.

Other rural areas such as the Karoo and the West Coast came into the fold much later.

How possible is that selfless effort today?

In answering that question it is important to consider the values which underlined those selfless deeds during the eighties. We need to examine the values which inspired those comrades to reach such high levels of commitment. Since the coming of the nineties, things seem to change within our country. A new culture arrived with the nineties. It brought and legitimated the "market". And in a very short space of time it took control of practically every aspect of our lives. Though the market had been with us for a long time it remained condemned, the domain of decadent white society. And whereas some of us were quite sceptical about it at the beginning, we eventually succumbed. Today it regulates and controls all of our lives. It determines how we conduct our politics. It writes the scripts of our locally produced soapies. Increasingly our young minds at school are imprinted with the dictates of the market. Drilling them in the art of selling themselves.

It influences the way we play sports, the way we speak, the way we dress. Our public appearances are carefully choreographed. These are the requirements of the market. It demands that we present ourselves as saleable commodities. As functionaries we are required to possess a certain measure of exchange value, like any other commodity for sale. Such are the dictates of the "market". And more better if it is "packaged" in an Italian-designed suit and driven in a German-produced automobile. And if so, the exchange value increases and the market rewards a higher premium. But on the market not all goods up for sale are sought. Similarly, some of us discover that we are not appropriately packaged. And we begin to doubt our own worth, our own self-worth. Others seem to find somewhat more expedient ways, albeit criminal ways, to appropriate what the market has to offer.

In our market society everyone looks out for himself - and only himself. Nobody is his brother's keeper. Very different from the tenets held and forged during the camaraderie of the eighties. Very different from the values that inspired the likes of Vuyisile Mini, or Mntuli ka Sezi, or Neil Aggett, or Anton Frans.

The new values emerging within our nascent democracy are at the opposite pole of those prevalent during the times of the UDF. We can hardly expect the values, which

came with the nineties, to give rise to those selfless deeds seen during the time of the UDF.

But looking back, and yearning for the past, would be retrogressive. Progress lies in the future, so history teaches.