

# United Democratic Front (UDF)

The first branches of what later became the United Democratic Front were formed in May 1983 in the Transvaal, Cape Province and Natal. They were established in response to a call by Dr Allan Boesak at a meeting of the Transvaal Anti-South Africa Indian Council's congress. He suggested that all opposition to the 1983 constitution for a tricameral parliament and the related "Koornhof bills" should be united, or as he put it: "the politics of refusal needed a united front". (As will become apparent at the end of this entry, the organisation would disband in August 1991. However, many of its affiliated members disbanded after the restrictions on the UDF were lifted in February 1990.)

The UDF was launched nationally at a meeting at Mitchell's Plain on 20 August 1983. Three national presidents were appointed, namely Archie Gumede, Oscar Mpetha and Albertina Sisulu, while Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr Boesak, Helen Joseph, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki were appointed patrons. Popo Molefe was appointed general secretary and Patrick "Terror" Lekota publicity secretary.

In the period from 1983 to 1989 the UDF established itself as one of the most prominent political movements in South Africa with more than 600 affiliated organisations. From the outset it was clear that the UDF preferred to be the heir, rather than a clone, of the ANC. There was an obvious correspondence between principles and personalities in the UDF and ANC, as can be seen from the composition of the UDF's top structure.

After its formation, the UDF declared it wanted to establish a true democracy in which all South Africans could participate and create a single, non-racial, unfragmented South Africa. The UDF was non-racial in the sense that it welcomed support from members of all races. Although it permitted group mobilization based on a specific ethnicity, the overall aim remained the achievement of a non-racial society. The dominant political characteristic of the UDF was that most of its affiliated members supported the Freedom Charter. (The UDF itself adopted the Freedom Charter in 1987.) But because the UDF permitted its members a great deal of independence, acceptance of the Freedom Charter was not compulsory. It is clear that the UDF and its supporters had great sympathy for the ANC and its leaders.

The organisation had a wide range of interpretations of and solutions to the problems in South Africa. Certain elements in the bourgeois NIC, for example, are inspired by Gandhi's philosophy; this runs counter to the Marxist analysis of society, which is supported by many trade unions and community organisations. Although a number of veterans of the South African Congress of Trade Unions had leadership positions in the UDF, it was not a workers' organisation, and most of its leaders were drawn from the bourgeoisie. Its populist approach (in terms of which workers as well as non-workers should contribute to the struggle against apartheid) alienated some trade unions from the UDF. Similarly the organisation's preference for non-racialism clouded its relationship with black consciousness groups that opposed the fact that liberal whites occupied leadership positions in the UDF. The UDF's relationship with other black organisations, especially the National Forum (1983) and Inkatha, was always tense.

Although the UDF and the most important affiliated member of the National Forum, Azapo, often joined forces in their struggle against apartheid, a number of violent clashes between members of the two groups impaired their relationship. Yet the differences between the two organisations were not as serious as alleged in certain government circles. In some cases the South African police tried to blame Azapo members for violent attacks on UDF supporters, when most of these attacks were apparently the work of right-wing vigilantes, often allegedly acting with the assistance of the police. The UDF's strained relationship with Inkatha came to a head in the late eighties in Natal where thousands of people were killed in the ongoing violence between the two organisations.

The UDF functioned as an umbrella organisation with a broad range of affiliates, including over 300 youth organisations, more than 80 civic associations and nearly 50 student organisations. One of the largest civic organisations affiliated to the UDF was the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (Pebco), launched in October 1979 under the leadership of Thomazile Botha. A major aim of Pebco was to unite blacks at local level by focusing attention on grievances such as housing, electricity and roads, and the lack of infrastructure in black neighbourhoods.

The UDF received a great deal of support from the youth, and also had impressive grassroots support. Initially the UDF had only a small trade union membership – about 20 trade unions representing 140 000 workers. Most of these were affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). (Cosatu later became an affiliated member of the UDF.) A few independent trade unions also formed ties with the UDF. At least one homeland party, the Na-tional Unity Party of Bophuthatswana, was affiliated to the UDF. The LTDF had a large black membership, and coloureds and Indians were also well represented. Support from white organisations was initially poor, but towards the end of the eighties their support grew considerably.

The UDF's opposition to apartheid manifested itself in a number of actions. Shortly after its formation, it launched a successful boycott action against the election of the (coloured) House of Representatives and (Indian) House of Delegates. The UDF was involved in the organisation of a number of consumer boycotts and stay-aways. In 1983 and 1984, it launched the "one million signatures" campaign, in which signatories were asked to voice their opposition to the so-called Koornhof legislation on black local government, as well as to the new constitution.

However, the UDF's greatest impact was at grassroots level where it created local structures that played a key role in the political education and mobilization of the masses. At its second national congress, held in April 1985, it was decided to transform mass support into active participation, under the theme "From Protest to Challenge: From Mobilization to Organisation". Four months later this theme was extended to include a new slogan, "Forward to People's Power". The UDF's strategy was to replace decision-making structures created by the government with a system of "people's power". It was equivalent to the establishment of "liberated areas" in South Africa.

The state headed off this threat and suppressed the general unrest in the country, which reached a peak in 1985, by calling a series of states of emergency. A large number of people were arrested in terms of security legislation. The UDF, in particular, was badly affected. Several key members of the organisation were murdered, including Matthew Goniwe (UDF organiser in the Eastern Cape) and Victoria Mxenge (UDF treasurer in Natal). Almost the entire leadership corps of the UDF was restricted in the period 1985 to 1987. This not only caused the organisation to lose a great deal of its momentum, but also to re-evaluate its strategic position. Accordingly a new theme, "Defend, Consolidate, Advance", was proposed, and a new strategy of underground organisation implemented. The 1987 UDF congress was held in near-total secrecy. The UDF's largest affiliated member, Sayco, was also launched secretly in March 1987.

By 24 February 1988, when UDF activities were restricted by the state, the organisation allegedly had between 600 and 700 affiliates with more than 2,5 million members. According to the restriction regulations the UDF was prohibited from "executing or continuing any actions", but was permitted to retain its assets and keep its books up to date. The government alleged it had sufficient evidence to prove the UDF was a "creation" of the ANC, and therefore also party to the "revolutionary onslaught". After it was restricted, the UDF continued its activities under the mantle of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), which in effect was the UDF operating under another name.

There were indications that a power bloc existed within the UDF which played an important role in formulating policy from 1986 onwards. (Towards the end of 1990 ANC as well as UDF leaders acknowledged the existence of such a group within UDF ranks with its own "hidden agenda".) This bloc was described as a cabal by UDF critics. The cabal was not a structured organisation with a secret membership, but merely a loose group of individuals within the UDF with a different agenda

to that of the ANC. Aspects of its policy agenda included cooperation with certain government institutions to obtain control and thus establish "dual power"; support for the principle of negotiation and flexibility regarding the prerequisites for negotiation; support for a non-violent strategy to gain political power; concern over the lack of control displayed by the militant youth; and a pragmatic approach to contact and cooperation with organisations not affiliated to the SACP and ANC.

Although members of the cabal were also members of the ANC, Cosatu and even the SACP, they were strongly critical of the Marxist-Leninist approach, and in some cases even of the black nationalist militancy of SACP and ANC leaders. The following key leaders in the UDF were among those associated with the cabal: Murphy Morobe (publicity secretary), Mohamed Valli Moosa (general secretary), Elijah Barayi (former president of Cosatu), Archie Gumede (joint president of the UDF), Fatima Meer (management member of the NIC) and Farid Esack (former coordinator of Call of Islam).

After the lifting of restrictions on the UDF and unbanning of the ANC in February 1990 the overlapping membership of the two organisations became even more apparent. It was emphasized that the UDF would not disappear immediately, but that members of this umbrella organisation would gradually be introduced into new ANC structures. Members of the cabal were systematically removed from influential positions and accordingly direct confrontation was avoided. The views of the members of the cabal were often very similar to those of moderate ANC leaders.

In September 1990 another civic organisation, Civic Associations of Southern Transvaal (Cast), functioning mainly under UDF leadership attracted much publicity. Claiming to reject all institutions based exclusively on race, it launched an action programme against white local governments in 1991. According to assistant general secretary Cas Coovadia, Cast has 49 affiliated civic organisations. Other community leaders involved with Cast are Moses Mayekiso, Cyril Ramaphosa, Sam Ntuli and Kgabisi Mosunkutu. At its national congress in 1991, Cast and other civic organisations will consider the desirability of forming a national civic organisation to coordinate mass action at community level.

A planning group, Planact, which was launched in the late eighties to provide an advisory service to civic organisations, has also played an important role in the extension of Cast. People involved in Planact are, among others, Mark Swilling, Rowland Hunter and Andrew Boraine. Planact, which is a supporter of the negotiation process at local level (due to the participation in a metropolitan chamber for local management councils on the Rand), also acts as a facilitator.

In March 1991 the UDF announced that the organisation would disband on 20 August 1991, its eighth anniversary. Patrick Lekota, publicity secretary of the UDF, emphasized that the organisation would not unite with the ANC, but individual members could be accommodated in the ANC.

A new organisation, the South African National Civic Association (Sanca), in which well-known leaders of the UDF will continue to play a role, will be established.

Although the organisation will support the ANC's principles, the civic organisations which are included wish to operate independently of the ANC as a resistance movement together with supporters in the labour field, such as Cosatu.

One of the aims of Sanca will be to create a new social movement in which the aspirations of the remaining communities will be placed in the centre of the political debate. The idea is to create a "civil society" that will ensure the continuance of a democratic culture in a post-apartheid South Africa. The aim of the Metropolitan Chamber, of which Dr Frederik van Zyl Slabbert is chair-man, is to serve as negotiating forum in the search for a non-racial, democratic metropolitan and local government structure.

It is impossible to give a complete list of all the organisations affiliated to the UDF. On p 211 there is a graphic representation of the UDF's structure. Some of the more prominent affiliated members

(categorized according to their activities and target group) were as follows:

#### POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS

End Conscription Campaign (ECC)

Cape Democrats – see p 80.

Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC)

Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee (Jodac)

Five Freedoms Forum (FFF)

Natal Indian Congress (NIC)

Detainees' Parents' Support Committee (DPSA) now the National Anti-Repression Forum

#### YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

South African Youth Congress (Sayco)

Congress of South African Students (Cosas)

#### WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

Federation of South African Women (Fedsaw)

Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation

United Women's Organisation

Federation of Transvaal Women

#### CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS

Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (Pebco)

Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (Cahac)

Soweto Civic Association

Vaal Civic Association

Border Civic Association

Durban Housing Action Committee

Joint Residents' Action Committee

#### STUDENT AND TEACHER ORGANISATIONS

South African National Students' Congress (Sansco)

National Union of South African Students (Nusas)

Northern Transvaal Students' Congress

Border Students' Congress

National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC)

National Education Union of South Africa (Neusa)