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Democratic opposition:
The progressive movement in South Africa

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Edited text of a speech delivered by Auret van Heerden, to both the NUSAS Congress in Durban and to a joint sitting of the AZASO General Students Council and COSAS National Council in Durban, Nov—Dec. 1982.

The progressive movement in South Africa is a young one. Although part of a tradition of struggle which began early this century, this current phase of organisation and struggle only really began in late 1977. If our movement for democracy is to reach its full potential we are going to have to look very carefully at what we have achieved over the last couple of years — at our gains and at our losses. And we must use that assessment to plan where we go from here.

So in my talk, I want to rely on Amilcar Cabral's dictum that we should tell no lies and claim no easy victories. I want to start off by asking why we organise. Why do we even bother to spend so much time, so much energy, so much money, and make the sacrifices that we do to organise people? Now this may seem like a very simple question but I think that its answer has contained within it a number of subtle aspects that we don't often examine and debate.

Obviously we are trying to involve people in organisation so that they can change their lives. People are suffering; they have problems and grievances; and the only way that they can change that, is if they organise and struggle and change their lives.

So the very first aspect of why we organise is that we want to involve people in organisations. We want to provide them with the means for changing their lives. And yet if we look at our organisations, be they the trade unions, the students and women's groups, the community organisations, we so often see that the people are not involved in those organisations.

The form of organisation and the ways in which we have attempted to mobilize have often not made it possible for people to participate. So we end up with organisations consisting only of leaders who make press statements and address meetings and issue pamphlets but with few ordinary working people involved.

The first point I want to make then is that if we are to change our society, if we are to liberate ourselves, we are going to have to directly involve people in organisation and struggle. However, here we enter into a second problem, another one of the subtle aspects that I mentioned earlier. When we try to involve people in organisation and struggle we do so from a position of awareness. We have analysed the situation, understood that particular form of oppression and decided to mobilize against it.

But the people as a whole very often don't share the same level of awareness that we enjoy. They most probably haven't analysed the situation, but even if they have, we must not forget that our socialisation, education and information through the family, the school, the church, the newspapers and T.V. are all designed to mask the real nature of oppression and exploitation in our society.

But for most people, the struggle for survival is more important than any other struggle and they are forced to spend 18 hours of their day just trying to keep themselves alive. It's very difficult for them, under those circumstances, to be analysing their society and deciding on organisation and change.

So we are going to have to appeal to people on the basis of issues which they see as important and which they can identify with. But, by the same token, we are going to have to use those issues to educate people, to raise their awareness.

Let's say we decided to oppose a rent increase. People may identify with the issue and support the community organisation, organising the campaign against the increase. But, even if the campaign is a success and the rent increase is scrapped, we won't necessarily have changed our society at all. Workers will still be paid poverty wages, people will still be forced to live in squalid townships, political rights will still be denied to the majority of South Africans.

Precisely because most people are unaware and unpoliticized, the issues which they see as important are likely to be local, specific grievances, which are seldom overtly political, and their demands are unlikely to be political or even progressive.

So, we have to take up issues which the people themselves see as important but at the same time we cannot leave those issues there. We have to try to develop them from what may be entirely reformist demands which could easily be met within the current framework of South African society, into progressive political demands which would ultimately require fundamental change.

The two elements of our answer to the question "Why do we organise" that we have identified so far then, are the democratic participation of people in struggles to change their lives and the education of people through these struggles.

Now if we look back at organisation in the '70's, we see that most of them failed to involve people and their demands were largely addressed to an already politicized audience. They were never really able to reach the working class, what some people call the grassroots. But by 1977 people had started reflecting very critically on the first five or six years of the '70's and realizing their mistakes, developed an entirely different approach to organisation, an approach which in fact made progressive organisation possible for maybe the first time in twenty years.

What they started to look at was not the issues which we as a politicised, relatively organised community saw as important, but issues which the people saw as important. So we saw organisation springing up in constituencies where no organisation existed before. We saw the growth of community organisations, women's organisations. We saw the consolidation of student organisation in AZASO and COSAS. A number of new trade unions emerged. Activists began concentrating on grassroots, democratic participative organisation. Organisations began taking up issues which many people had previously regarded as reformist, collaborationist or non-political. Before 1977 many organisations would have scoffed at the notion of negotiating with education or township authorities.

A more strategic approach to organisation and struggle emerged. The grassroots organisations taking these issues up realised for the first time in many years that these issues were not ends in themselves. In the first place, the victories that can be won at that level of organisation which can lessen the burdens which people have to bear every day is fighting an important struggle and winning an important victory.

But people realised that there is a lot more potential to these issues. They serve as a starting point which can be developed and broadened out to touch on fundamental political questions. This is a vital qualification, because although the local, specific issues which people see as important have a potential to organise, mobilize and educate people, they must never be seen as ends-in-themselves.

Organisations taking up issues like high rentals, poor school conditions, low wages and high bus fares will draw support from people because they are directly affected. And these issues definitely have a potential to educate people. But that potential is a limited one. What we've found though, is that as soon as that organisation attempts to

extend the issue beyond the question of rentals, it begins to lose support because people regard it as falling outside the realm of their immediate interests.

I recall an incident during the 1980 school boycotts which were characterised by a militant and radical rhetoric. Yet when Wits students approached boycotting coloured pupils on the West Rand of Johannesburg and asked them to sign a petition calling for the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, they refused on the grounds that it was a political demand whereas their boycott was not.

What I'm saying is that while these organisations have a capacity to organise, mobilize and educate people around issues particular to their constituents, their ability to extend them into other issues and into political issues is limited. So we run a real risk of being trapped at this first level of organising people around specific community, factory, student or women's issues which will not allow the organisation, being defined in a particular way, to extend beyond them and instil a political awareness in their supporters.

There are two implications in what I am saying. Firstly, the local, specific problems which our community, factory, students and women's organisations take up have a potential to organise, mobilize and educate which must be maximised, but that ultimately these organisations and the issues they take up fall within the framework of our current society. We need organisations making demands which cannot be met within the framework of an oppressive and exploitative society. Organisation which is not confined to one particular group of people and their specific problems but which straddles racial, regional and sexual boundaries; which does not organise us as residents of a particular community or workers in a particular industry, but as oppressed and exploited people demanding a democratic way of life.

The second implication then is that we need a second level of explicitly political organisation, mobilisation and education which goes beyond the individual battles waged by Resident's Associations, Trade Unions, and so on. Such a political organisation could not exist without those first level organisations, however, because it is through involvement in them that people are made aware of their capacity to organise and change their lives and at the same time such first level organisation would ultimately be meaningless if it were not supplemented by a second level of political organisation and struggle. There's

a reciprocal, or shall I say dialectical relationship between the two levels of organisation.

Let us look at some examples of what we mean by first and second level organisation. The importance of developing first level issues to a point where certain overall political demands can be made was well demonstrated in the struggle to save the Crossroads squatter camp. The wives and children of contract workers were being arrested and sent back to the bantustans. They'd get back to the bantustans and find it impossible to survive because of the almost total lack of employment or means of subsistence. And so at great risk to themselves they would come back to Crossroads, would again be arrested and endorsed out to the bantustans.

A number of Church and Welfare organisations, working with Crossroads residents, opposed the removals on the grounds that families had a God-given right to live together. It was a demand which drew a lot of support from the community and from local and international organisations. But having defined it as an issue of family life, they never took it any further.

This left the door wide open for Piet Koornhof to come in and say that he too, as a Christian, was concerned about the separation of these families and to grant the wives and children affected temporary permits to remain in the Western Cape. It also allowed Koornhof to make a lot of capital about the dismantling of apartheid whereas nothing had changed. Those squatters still had no permanent right to remain in the Western Cape, so-called "illegals" all over the country were still being hunted down and sent to bantustans, black people still had no meaningful political rights. And yet Koornhof had apparently met the demand for those families to live together.

The issue, however, could have been approached in an entirely different way. Family life could still have been the initial rallying point, but the issue could then have been moved on to a second phase by asking why the families were being separated. The answer would have been — migrant. The focus of resistance could then have become the migrant labour system. The issue could then have been extended beyond that by asking why we have a migrant labour system and the answer to that is that it makes labour cheaper and easier to control. The control and exploitation of labour would then have been spotlighted, making clear that apartheid controls

have the effect of making it easier to control and exploit labour, and that even if we were to dismantle apartheid we would still have to free ourselves from exploitation.

We could contrast the Crossroads experience with an example drawn from the Meat Strike in 1980. Workers struck because management refused to accept their right to democratically elect non-racial factory committees to represent them instead of the racially separate committees management was insisting on.

The Union stressed that the demand of the workers in the factory was echoed on a national level by the demand of the majority of our people to democratically elect political representatives on a non-racial basis. In this way they linked their specific factory demand to a national political demand.

Turning to the issue of second level political organisation, there are a number of examples from the last couple of years from which we need to draw lessons. Looking at the progressive movement we see that organisation in the communities, factories, and amongst women and students expanded and developed from late '77 to '81. From 1979 however, the objective political climate changed and thrust a new level of activity on these emerging first level organisations. It began with the Fattis and Monis boycott in 1979 which brought community, labour and student groups all over the country together in support of the striking Fattis and Monis workers. We then moved to the Release Mandela Campaign, from there into the school boycotts, then into rent, bus and meat boycotts, then into the anti-Republic Day campaign, from the anti-Republic Day campaign into the anti-SAIC campaign and the anti-Ciskei independence campaign.

We saw spontaneous riots and protests in townships in places like Bloemfontein and Kimberly. In Bloemfontein residents who had not had the benefit of any formal organisation built barricades and prevented the police and army from entering the township. This mass mobilisation established political momentum which almost seemed to have a life of its own, and campaigns like Release Mandela, anti-SAIC, and anti-Republic Day tapped the spontaneous militancy which was simmering just below the surface.

We suddenly found ourselves able to command a huge support base,

large attendances at mass meetings, marches, demonstrations. Our pamphlets, militant speeches and demands were eagerly accepted. We felt we were making great strides in mobilising people politically, but in an euphoria, we made four basic mistakes.

We mistook mass mobilisation for political organisation. Because of the overtly political nature of campaigns like Release Mandela, anti-Republic Day and anti-SAIC, we felt that we were catering for the essential second level of political organisation. First level organisations were able to use these campaigns as reference points to inject some political content into their otherwise reformist activities. But mobilisation is not organisation and we've seen countless times over the last few years how terribly quickly mobilisation can dissipate and die unless it is translated into some organisation, into some on-going activity.

That was our second mistake. We failed to concretise our political gains and advances by using them to build organisation at either the first or the second level.

The third and fourth mistakes have to do with the way we mobilised. I think that the excitement of the campaigns and the enthusiastic support that they received seduced us and drew us away from the tasks of building our first level organisations. Many of our activists and leaders had to neglect their work in the factories and communities and amongst women and students in order to organise and lead campaigns and so instead of complimenting grassroots organisation, these campaigns inevitably detracted from it which is not to say that the activists and leaders involved had any other choice but to take the lead in those campaigns. Precisely because we have not built sufficient political organisation, community, labour and student and women activists had to take responsibility for the campaigns.

The fourth mistake we made was to not take our constituency with us. We were just beginning to consolidate our first level organisations and should have used the mass mobilisation to strengthen our organisation and to raise the awareness of our supporters but too often we raced ahead of them. We telescoped the political process and leapt from specific demands about local issues and grievances to militant demands for the total political capitulation of the current status quo. But we hadn't devised strategies or organisational forms which were capable of taking our grassroots support base with us.

The high levels of mass mobilisation continued until late 1981 and then things began to wind down. Grassroots organisation seemed to reach a ceiling. After a couple of hectic years of activity too, was time to reflect and take stock of the situation, and this internal dynamic combined with a dramatic upsurge in the number of detentions, bannings and other acts of repression, all of which took place against the backdrop of a gathering recession. The progressive movement entered a period of lull, on some fronts, even of retreat, and if we are to emerge from this stronger than before, we are going to have to critically assess the effectiveness with which we have organised, mobilised and educated our people over the last few years.

Starting with organisation, one of the key problems that progressive organisations are running into, is that of sustaining organisation. A lot of our organisations grew rapidly during '80 - '81; interest in them was high and people were eager to participate. Now we are finding that interest and involvement are tailing off and support is far harder to mobilise. So we are going to have to learn to develop new ways to sustaining our organisation, of maintaining the involved. It's no use mobilizing people and then after three or four months starting to think of ways of consolidating their involvement.

Right at the beginning when we're deciding on an issue to organise and mobilise around, we must work out how we are going to get people involved and how we are going to keep them involved. It's no use mobilizing people and then after three or four months starting to think of ways of consolidating their involvement.

The 1980 Soweto rent boycott provides a number of lessons about involving people in organisation and about planning in advance how to consolidate mobilisation into on-going activity. Rent increases in three phases were announced and a mass meeting was held to discuss the issue. About 2 000 people attended the mass meeting and voted to boycott the rent increases. The call to boycott was advertised through the press and endorsed by a number of organisations. The organisation of the boycott mainly took the form of an application to the Supreme Court to prevent the Community Council from collecting the rents on the grounds that the correct procedure had not been followed by the West Rand Administration Board and the Minister of Co-operation and Development.

Now there are a number of points which need to be drawn out here.

The first is that the decision to boycott was taken by 2 000 people at a mass meeting — about 1 percent of the total population of Soweto. Right from the start therefore, Soweto residents had not been properly caucused as to whether they supported a decision to boycott. Secondly, a boycott relies on a high degree of organisation which simply didn't exist in Soweto at that stage, and the manner in which people went about the boycott wasn't one that could build up organisation within. By deciding to wage a legal battle, they took the struggle out of Soweto and into the Supreme Court, out of the hands of the people and into the hands of legal experts. It started out as a grassroots issue which people could identify with, and became a bunch of legal technicalities that no-one could understand.

The only connection between the struggle and the people of Soweto, were the newspaper reports of the court action. And even if people did read those newspaper reports, it is likely that they made as little sense to them as they did to me, because it was a highly technical and legalistic argument. But even if they had been able to decipher the reports, they would have discovered that even if the action succeeded it would only have delayed the increases.

Alas, the issue disappeared as far as resistance was concerned, but remained as far as the increases were concerned. The potential for organising, mobilizing and educating the community — a community with a tradition of militant political activity, simply dissipated.

In this regard we have to look critically at the issue orientation of many of our organisations. Hinging activity around issues raises three problems. The first is that an issue only lasts for a certain space of time. It tends to flare up and then die down again and so if we rely on issues as the basis of our activity we are going to find it, and the involvement of our constituents, fluctuating.

Obviously there will always be issues which we have to take up and these can, and must, be used as springboards for organisation, but we must ensure that we use them to establish on-going programmes of activity which keep people involved and keep the organisation alive.

The second problem with this issue orientation is that many issues are defined in a win/lose way. They're issues which we either win or we lose. The demand advanced by some of the boycotting schools in 1980 for the complete scrapping of Bantu Education provides

an example of this because if the Government didn't scrap Bantu Education, the students would never have been able to return to school without being seen to have "lost". We have to bear in mind that our organised response to these issues is a tactical and not a principled one and as such our demands do not have to be total. One battle is not going to win the war and it is enough that each battle allows us to advance a little in terms of the strength of our organisation and the awareness of our members. In this sense we don't only speak of victory when our demands have been met. Nonetheless, it is important for us to formulate realistic demands, demands which could feasibly be met, and to formulate them in such a way that there is enough middle ground for compromise and even, if necessary, retreat.

The Committee of 81 which co-ordinated the 1980 School Boycotts in the Western Cape, appreciated this and so made short, medium and long term demands and made them in such a way that they could tactically return to school even though their demands had not been fully met.

Another aspect of this win/lose problem is demonstrated by something like squatter removals. We've often seen progressive activists moving into a squatter community which is threatened with eviction and trying to organise and mobilise those people against the evictions. But it's an issue which is almost impossible to win. Those people are going to be moved and their shacks demolished and so we are going to lose. And in losing our organisation may be smashed and even the awareness that we are able to generate amongst those people may be gone within a very short space of time because those people may be dying of starvation in the bantustans.

But of course there will always be issues that we cannot ignore, that we have to take up. And if it is necessary to take up an issue which we cannot win, we must recognise this from the beginning and plan our structures and organising strategy accordingly, so that, even in defeat, we make organisational and ideological gains.

Although it's a helluva hard decision to take, I think that we must become far more strategic about where we organise and which issues we take up. This is a lesson which some of the trade unions have learnt. They started out recruiting any worker that wanted to be organised, but have realised that at a certain point this starts to