

# **R2K DISCUSSION DOCUMENT ON COALITIONS & FRONTS**

*[Written by Dale T. McKinley - January 2016]*

***NOTE: This discussion document was mandated by the R2K National Working Group (NWG) at its 2015 Mid-term Review. It is offered against the backdrop of R2K's ongoing discussions around how best to understand, orient towards, engage with and be practically involved in progressive coalitions and fronts. While the main focus over the last year in particular has been on the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) initiated 'United Front', there are also other initiatives - both older and newer - that R2K has engaged and been involved with, in varying degrees.***

## **Macro history/context: concept and practice**

In its broadest (dictionary) definition, the term 'united front' (UF) refers to: "a state or appearance of unity, common purpose, or general agreement usually presented by a diverse group in the face of opposition or danger from an outside source". Somewhat similarly, a 'coalition' is generally understood to mean "a group of people who join together for a common cause" or alternatively, "an alliance, especially a temporary one, of people, factions, parties, or nations".

In this sense, and more specific to the purpose of this discussion document, a UF or a coalition can consist of any collection of organisations (such as civil society groups, unions, political parties and private businesses) and individuals.

However, in the South African context much of the approach to and understanding of, fronts and coalitions is located within the history of revolutionary, anti-capitalist struggles. Here, it was the Bolsheviks who were the first to introduce the idea and practice of the UF at a national and indeed international level, after their victory in the 1917 revolution. They saw it as a tactic to "achieve the greatest possible unity of all workers' organisations in every practical action against the united capitalists". Importantly, the Bolsheviks insisted that each component of the UF would have "absolute autonomy" and "freedom in presenting their point of view".

This was then taken further by the COMINTERN (the international collection of communist parties initiated by the Bolsheviks) in its 1922 thesis which stated that: "The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie". Beyond this though, the UF should be a vehicle for "winning the other parts of the working class to revolutionary politics" and ultimately be a tool "that could help forge the unity needed to achieve workers' power".

When it comes specifically to South African struggle history, the idea and practice of the UF tactic was subject to intense debate and division amongst 'left/progressive' forces in the 1920s and 30s. Taking its cue from a Stalin-dominated COMINTERN, the Communist Party of

South Africa (CPSA - later the SACP) turned the UF tactic into a political and organisational strategy of a formal alliance with a national liberation movement - in this case, the African National Congress (ANC).

While there were other (non-Stalinist) forces - mainly in the emerging union movement - that sought to practically forge a UF amongst various sections of the organised working class to "defend [its] immediate, basic interests", it was the CPSA-ANC alliance that eventually achieved political and organisational dominance. This dominance culminated in the formation of the Congress movement which, while inclusive of sizeable sections of the broader (black) working class, was largely led by intellectual and middle class elements under the overall political leadership of the ANC.

When the 'Freedom Charter' was adopted by the Congress Alliance in 1955, the kind of UF initially envisaged and pursued by the Bolsheviks was consigned to the historical dustbin. Instead of a UF initiated by communists and worker organisations to forge unity with other worker groups and parties, there was a formalised political and organisational alliance that was neither initiated nor controlled by worker organisations and whose main focus was not on defending, advancing and uniting workers' interests and power but on waging a struggle for 'national liberation'.

In this sense it could be argued that the ANC-SACP (Congress) Alliance succeeded in laying the basis for the forging of a 'front' of a different type - more in line with the dictionary definition of the UF. However, it would be more accurate to simply call it what it was and is; an alliance, which is closer to a coalition but crucially different in that a coalition is hardly ever a formal/permanent (strategic) arrangement but a temporary (tactical) alliance for a specific purpose/goal.

However, it took another 30 years for anything approaching a meaningful UF (or coalition of progressive forces) to emerge. In the context of a combined and escalating economic and political crisis in the early 1980s that hit the broad (black) working class the hardest, there was an explosion of NGO, civic, student, women, religious, union and other community-based organisation and mobilisation.

Despite contending efforts (such as the AZAPO initiated 'National Forum'), it was the ANC-SACP's political hegemony that eventually saw the 1983 launch of a 'United Democratic Front' (UDF). Conceived of as an umbrella organisation of all "progressive people and groupings" the UDF was however, for the most part, politically (and often organisationally) aligned to the ANC-SACP, even if not formally as was the case with the largest union federation, COSATU. While UDF membership was spread across a broad social and class spectrum, the mass membership was black working class and the national leadership consisted mainly of a middle-class intelligentsia, most of whom were old ANC stalwarts or recently converted Charterists.

From 1990, when the ANC 'returned home' as the dominant liberation organisation it proceeded to encourage and facilitate the demobilisation and systematic incorporation of, most Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) into its own organisational structures and or allied coalitions (e.g. SANCO). In turn, in the immediate aftermath of the ANC's ascension to state

power in April 1994, many activists within what had previously constituted a fairly broad-based progressive civil society were absorbed into the new state.

With the setting up of national structures to give institutional form to its corporatist commitments (for example, the National Economic, Development & Labour Council - NEDLAC), the cumulative impact was the effective sanitising of civil society. The more immediate dual result was a 'development agenda' increasingly driven by state and private (corporate) donor funding and the slow death of the vast majority of independent CSOs and a serious loss of both civil society space and place for any sustained and collective macro-systemic engagement and contestation of the state at the institutional and policy levels.

For the first several years after the 1994 elections that brought the ANC into power, there were no significant, national-level and politically independent 'fronts and coalitions' to speak of; although there were a few, smaller, sectorally-based and single-issue coalitions mostly made up of NGOs, such as the Coalition for Lesbian & Gay Equality and the South African NGO Coalition (which still exists). The dominant strategic purpose of these coalitions was largely oriented towards demanding and/or filling respective governance, delivery and legislative 'gaps'.

Over the last 15 or so years there have been a few attempts to forge and sustain more politically-oriented 'fronts and coalitions' involving the broader working class but more specifically initiated by community organisations/social movements, leftist groups and individual activists. For example, the Social Movements Indaba (SMI) which existed from 2002-2008 and that brought together a range of new social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum, the Landless People's Movement and the Anti-Eviction Campaign. There was also the very short-lived launch of a new 'UDF' in 2005 in the Western Cape (by COSATU and a small collection of community organisations as well as left groups and activists) and then the Democratic Left Front (DLF) which has been in operation since 2009.

In more recent years, we have once again seen sectoral and largely single-issue coalitions/alliances (most often located in geographically specific areas) formed around things such as healthcare (Eastern Cape Health Crisis Coalition - ECHCC), the environment (Climate Justice Network - CJN), freedom of expression (Freedom of Expression Network - FXN), energy (Coalition Against Nuclear Energy) and transport (Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance- OUTA). In most all cases, the coalitions/alliances have been dominated by NGOs and (middle class) individual activists, with occasional involvement (largely around mobilisation/protest) by some unions, workers as well as community organisations.

However, South Africa's first post-1994 UF (seen as more in line with the historic Bolshevik understanding and approach) then came about as a result of NUMSA's decision at its Congress in 2013 to "lead the establishment of a new United Front, whose task would be to coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities, in a way similar to the UDF of the 1980s". Once NUMSA was expelled from COSATU in late 2014, the process towards more formal constituting this new UF quickened with a series of meetings, conferences and a 'preparatory assembly' taking place.

Although there is now an 'Interim Steering Committee/National Working Committee', with some provincial and local structures having been set up, the UF has yet to be formally launched at a national level (the launch having been postponed now on several occasions). Further, a wide range of crucial issues such as the relationship of the UF to NUMSA, the UF's approach to elections and whether businesses, political parties or political groups should be allowed to join as full members, have yet to be collectively and formally decided.

### **R2K history/context: positions, discussions and actions**

The Right2Know Campaign itself was borne out of an initial, single-issue coalition mostly comprising of individual activists and a few NGOs coming together in opposition to the Secrecy Bill. The first public act of that coalition was to draft a 'Civil Society Statement' on the Secrecy Bill which was signed by tens of thousands of individuals as well as hundreds of civil society organisations.

In quick turn, this led to the formal launch of R2K (on 31 August 2010) - through the establishment of three provincially-based activist groups in the Western Cape (Cape Town), Gauteng (Johannesburg) and Kwa-Zulu Natal (Durban) - and several marches/ public activities targeting the Secrecy Bill. At the first national summit (February 2011), R2K was formally constituted as a Campaign, with delegates from those three activist groups adopting a set of R2K 'Principles' and a Draft Constitution setting out the Campaign's core, vision, mission and a common platform for action and organisation. Democratic structures were set up and three campaigning pillars of actions adopted.

The transformation into a 'Campaign' did not mean however, that R2K completely abandoned its founding 'coalition' character. Besides more formalised structures and membership and the expansion of its administrative/staff component, R2K was able to retain its larger, macro-character as a collective of autonomous organisations and individuals whose own (non-R2K) activism and work is embraced and supported rather than subsumed by R2K itself.

What is crucial to note about the genesis of R2K is that it represents one of the few examples in post-1994 South Africa of a single-issue coalition transforming into a formal, multi-issue organisation. What made this all the more impressive was the parallel ability to cut across South Africa's notoriously fractious civil society as well as historic class, racial and ideological divisions to lay the foundations for a unified national movement centred on access to information and freedom of expression.

In other words, our own organisational history provides us with a good example of a successful coalition and thus also provides us with clear pointers going forward, to understand, orient towards, engage with and be practically involved in progressive coalitions and fronts. In this regard, it is instructive to remind ourselves that R2K's own Constitution and Principles give a foundational mandate when it comes to our macro-approach to fronts and coalitions. They both instruct R2K, "to act in concert and solidarity with like-minded people and organisations locally and internationally".

For the first three years of R2K's existence this mandate was largely pursued 'internally' within and through the various coalition activities of R2K's own partner organisations. So for example, R2K became actively involved (and remains involved) in FXN, initiated and led by partner organisation the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI). However, as other civil society coalitions and explicitly political fronts began to emerge outside of R2K's more immediate terrain and approach R2K for solidarity/ support, it became imperative for the Campaign to engage in further reflection and discussion.

This led to R2K's adoption of a specific resolution on 'orientation to coalitions and fronts' at its 2014 National Summit that provided a much more specific set of principles and positions. Noting that "progressive forces in South Africa are experiencing a period of rejuvenation and there are a number of initiatives that are seeking greater unity and coordination of struggle", the resolution stated that:

- Right2Know must engage these processes to strengthen and shape them, guided by the following principles:
  - Coalitions/fronts should be non-sectarian and based on mutual respect
  - Coalitions/fronts should have mechanisms for accountability and internal democracy
  - Any engagement must include action and not only meetings
  - Any engagement is to be informed by our 2011 principles and values in unity and struggles
  - R2K must maintain our autonomy and independence
  - Individual structures/members are free to join fronts and coalitions
- While we will actively engage, we will not formally endorse or join any coalition/ front that does not address these guidelines. The decision to formally endorse any coalition/ front must be fully supported by all provincial and national working groups.

In reviewing the first 6 months of R2K activity following the National Summit, the 2014 NWG Mid-Term Review (MTR) acknowledged that while there were "opportunities to build broader coalitions around various R2K focus issues" (such as e-tolls) the main focus of the Campaign's attention and activity in respect of 'fronts and coalitions' was being directed towards the NUMSA-initiated United Front (UF), since it was the one "process that currently holds the most promise". At the same time, the NWG noted "the concern that some see the United Front process as one that will lead to the launch of a political party, as well as the involvement of some political parties in the exploratory process". In this regard, the NWG reiterated that "our supporters identify with a range of political parties and to maintain our unity we will withdraw from any process that has a party political agenda or recognises the formal participation of political parties".

R2K's approach to the UF was reaffirmed at the 2015 National Summit, with delegates mandating the provincial working groups "to continue to actively engage" the UF "at a provincial and local level". The NWG was mandated "to engage in discussions with the United Front's national leadership" as well as with the FXN. Overall, the Summit tasked R2K with identifying "networks and coalitions that we need to partner with and strengthen existing partnerships", more particularly "feminist organisations".

In mid-2015, a brief review of R2K's work with fronts and coalitions was conducted at the NWG MTR. It noted that the FXN had lost much of its initial energy and impact, and

although R2K continued to participate in FXN activities there was a need to engage more directly with the FXI to identify the challenges and prevent duplication of efforts. It was acknowledged that although R2K had begun an internal process to address patriarchy and gender relations within the Campaign, little progress had been made in respect of partnering with explicitly feminist organisations.

The review also confirmed R2K's membership in the PAIA Civil Society Network (a coalition of NGOs working on access to information) and that this was already opening up some new avenues for joint campaigning and cross-organisational work and support to communities. And further, that R2K had engaged and assisted OUTA on the access to information front, been actively involved in the Marikana Support Campaign (mainly through the Gauteng working group) and efforts were being made to kick-start a small coalition of Campaigns and NGOs around the nuclear deal. The effort around the nuclear issue was motivated because CANE did not appear to be functioning particularly well and there was the sense that given rapid developments by the state on the procurement front, there was the need to provide more organisational and mobilisational 'push' (more especially related to access to information and fraud-corruption issues).

With specific respect to the UF, the NWG noted the impressive range of both joint activities and coordination, inclusive of meetings, marches, pickets, surveillance research, Freedom Week events as well as contributing to shaping the UF's founding documents. Nonetheless, concerns were again expressed about the role of political groups/parties in the UF, the UF's approach to elections, the seeming failure of NUMSA to bring on board its own rank-and-file members, internal democracy within the UF, elements of the draft UF Constitution and delays in finalising the national launch of the UF. The NWG reaffirmed R2K's commitment to building the UF but, "on condition that political parties are not part of the Front, it does not contest elections, and it strengthens its internal democracy".

Besides the national summit resolutions and NWG discussions/decisions, the R2K Gauteng Working Group (GWG) has engaged in extensive discussions around the approach to the UF (*Note - both the W. Cape and KZN working groups might well have also engaged in similar discussions but as far as I know, there has not been any specific written reports on this to the NWG*). The GWG reaffirmed that "before R2K can endorse the UF, we need more direct engagement with the UF" to answer our questions/concerns and such engagement would "ideally [mean] UF members/leadership should address provincial working group meetings and engage directly". Further, the GWG indicated that "we would also like to play a part in discussions on the content of the constitution [since] we cannot sign on to a constitution which we had no part in shaping".

### **Opportunities and challenges moving forward**

In general terms, there can be no doubt that since 1994 (non-corporate) progressive CSOs in South Africa, despite serious organisational and resource challenges alongside an often hostile government and corporate sector, have achieved a great deal. A combination of localised community-based organisations, sectoral and/or issue-based social movements, progressive NGOs, some trade unions as well as variety of other immigrant, religious, environmental, youth, LGBTI and women's groups have all contributed to, amongst others:

the maintenance of a lively democratic culture; the defence and advancement of crucial human and constitutional rights; confronting the abuse of political and economic power; and struggling for practical alternatives to the societal status quo. We must, rightfully, recognise and celebrate these achievements as well as continue to be actively involved in associated coalitions.

However as the history/context provided above clearly reveals, there has been a glaring strategic weakness. This weakness is to be found in the general absence of broad-based fronts and coalitions wherein a wide range of CSOs work together for a clearly identified and common strategic purpose that has the declared intent and practical potential to shift dominant power relations in our society and thus also, the structure and exercise of power.

In some ways, it is our own R2K Campaign that provides a still incipient example that it is possible to bring together both the individual and collective strengths of different activists and organisations in a strategic partnership that gradually but surely cuts across a narrow issue base and links various civil society organisational forms and struggle content. While R2K remains largely focused on core 'right to know' issues and struggles - access to information, freedom of expression and media/communications freedom and diversity - we have gone some way in broadening these out and linking them to a wide range of other issues and struggles predominately located within and involving, the broader working class.

Nonetheless, whether it is R2K or other forms of coalition building in recent years, these remain within relatively narrow social and numerical bases. Further, they have had limited impact on progressively shifting the structure and exercise of both political and economic power which, we must remind ourselves, is the foundational terrain on which all the various issues and struggles taken up by civil society (whether in South Africa or elsewhere) occur.

This is where, for the purposes of present day South Africa, the concept and practice of a 'united front' comes centrally into the picture; precisely because in its broadest sense, it posits the inclusion and mobilisation of ALL "progressive people and groupings", whether they be from poor communities, from NGOs, from trade unions, from a range of different social sectors and that cut across both racial and (non-capitalist) class location.

Unlike the Bolsheviks 'united front' - which was specific to a particular time, place, correlation of social forces and positionality/character of the working class and capital - this kind of UF is not framed around the central role of a political party (whether at the point of formation of the UF or whether as a planned outcome of its activities and purpose) and thus also not around the direct contestation of institutional/electoral politics.

If we are to take the concept and practice of a 'united front' seriously, then surely its foundational strategic frame/purpose has to be that it is a space (inclusive of its form) for practical solidarity, networks, common and linked struggles and the forging of a unity of ALL progressive forces in the here and now and in direct proportion to the organic and spontaneous struggles thrown up by its constituents (a lesson that can be learnt from the 1980s UDF). The primary goal of any UF that R2K participates in should be to create and catalyse organic and practical links and solidarity through struggle – not through formalised structures, procedures and elections.

In contemporary South Africa, these struggles will necessarily be mostly of and through the broader working class. However, as UF national coordinator, Dinga Sikwebu has argued: “In building alliances, the working class cannot just focus on itself ... a ‘working class-only alliance’ is a contradiction in terms. The working class and its organisations – in addition to its concerns - must champion issues of other oppressed strata and classes in society”.

One of the key challenges with respect to the NUMSA-initiated UF is that there are those comrades in both the ranks of the UF and NUMSA and then also in various (and relatively small) political groupings involved in the UF whose main vision is for the UF to act as a vehicle for the contestation of elections (more immediately, the 2016 local government elections) and the establishment of a working class/workers political party. This is confirmed by the recent surfacing of serious disagreements within both NUMSA and the UF over these matters as well as the reported announcement - by NUMSA - that the UF will contest the coming local government elections.

*[Note - at the time of writing, the issue of UF electoral contestation remains unclear. It could well be that instead of the UF contesting elections as a whole - although there is yet no formal national form of the UF outside of an interim leadership collective - local organisations affiliated to the UF will contest elections through running independent candidates].*

Additionally, these comrades also appear to actively oppose the UF being/becoming what it should be in the context of present day socio-economic, political and organisational realities in South Africa (i.e. a front for ALL progressive forces and oppressed strata in society). Rather, they seem to be seeking a UF that is directly tied to a specific ideological and organisational history and which is highly contested amongst progressive forces. In the words of NUMSA’s 2013 Special Congress resolution, “the task of this Front will be to fight for the implementation of the Freedom Charter and to be an organisational weapon against neoliberal capitalist policies ...”

Even though NUMSA did pass this resolution and was at the forefront of the initiation of the UF as well as providing subsequent material and political support, the fact is that any meaningful UF cannot be held under the political and organisational command of any one of its constituent members, whether they be initiators or those that have joined since its journey began. Such a situation can quickly transform into a vanguardist, top-down and ideologically maximalist approach that is fundamentally at odds with the very purpose and practice of a UF - another lesson that can be learnt from the eventual demise of the 1980s UDF and its MDM successor.

South Africa’s own long past and more recent history has shown that an effective and sustained UF demands the charting of a new strategic path of civil society activism and collective solidarity. Such a path can only be realised with the confident assertion of a dynamic, organic independence which moves beyond the historical lacuna of party politics and form, beyond prescribed ideological commands and beyond comfortable civil society niches’ (whether individually or collectively). Further, that is rooted in practical grassroots struggles of the majority and that encompasses a local, national and international character



which engages/targets both the state and capital and that seeks to effect a broader societal change of consciousness.

As R2K, the current approach to the UF as adopted by the NWG (through the national summit resolutions) should be maintained. Namely, that R2K remains committed to engaging the UF, participating in its various processes and building its collective effectiveness and societal power through active solidarity and struggle; and, in doing so we also seek to strengthen the UF's internal democracy. However, if the UF's internal democracy is usurped and if the UF as a whole decides to include political parties and/or to contest elections as the UF, then R2K can no longer be a part of the UF.

Additionally, while R2K should continue to actively initiate, join and participate in other specific coalitions we should always be looking and acting to build a broader 'united front' of progressive forces that goes beyond their limited and sectoral terrain (as described earlier). It is hoped that the present UF can be that body but in order for this to be a real possibility we need to take the advice of Sikwebu to (assist in) "developing a minimum programme that can bring together all the social forces that will be under attack and that are prepared to fight".

More particularly, in doing so we must understand that there is no ideological "blueprint", that we must practice our activism "with humility and preparedness to learn from each other" and, "always be on the lookout for areas where we can pledge concrete solidarity to each other's struggles".

This will be a difficult road to travel but principled and consistent efforts to do so can provide a much-needed impetus for creating a formidable collection of progressive forces in struggle and forging a practical commonality for linked work/activism. Failure on this front will condemn South Africa's progressive forces to a future of self-marginalisation and constructed isolation.

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