

A RESPONSE TO DAVE LEWIS

Eddie Webster

I read with great interest the keynote address by David Lewis to UDUSA in *Transformation* 10. It is encouraging to read such unequivocal support for critical intellectual work from a respected and prominent trade unionist. University-based left intellectuals are often presented with a false dilemma: do they succumb to pressures to subordinate their intellectual work to particular political tendencies and organisations, or do they retreat into a narrow-based careerism?

By criticising intellectuals for 'the subordinated and rather obsequious attitude they adopt to their own work' (1989:64), Lewis makes a strong case for an alternative to both 'subordination' and 'privatism'. This alternative approach, which could be called critical engagement, makes no pretence at 'neutrality' and clearly supports the cause of labour. There is an attempt to link theory and practice. This engagement is critical, however, because by and large this category of intellectuals does not subordinate itself to a particular tendency in the trade union movement.

I do however wish to disagree with David on one point. He suggests, quite rightly, that 'political responsibility is a much abused concept. It is frequently used to suppress debate and to intimidate opponents' (1989:68). But to give, as an example of the suppression of debate, the response of the editors of the *South African Labour Bulletin* in 1980 to the registration debate is misleading.

As a member of the Editorial Board at that time my recollection of events is that most of the editors actively encouraged the debate. Of course feelings were running high and pressure was put on certain editors to respond to the immediate interests of particular tendencies in the debate.

What is important, however, about this incident is that considerable debate took place inside the Editorial Board and we successfully resisted the position dominant in FOSATU at that time that the arguments in favour of registration were too sensitive to be published. In November 1979 a memo written on behalf of the Western Province General Workers Union was published in the *SALB*. A reply supporting registration was published in September 1981. This was followed by a further six articles arguing either for or against registration.

Contrary to what David suggests, the registration debate is a clear example of intellectuals *not* subordinating themselves to a particular tendency or

organisational interest in the labour movement. The publication of the registration debate was to be a turning point in the history of the *SALB*. Not only did the *SALB* provide the only written record of this important debate, but it established the *SALB* as a genuinely independent forum for the democratic trade union movement.