Trade Unions and Community Organisations
Towards a Working Alliance?

Edwin Ritchken

Introduction

This paper attempts to outline and to explain the changing relationship between trade unions and community organisations on a local, regional and national level in the 1980s. It is organised around a critique of the essay by Karl von Holdt, 'The Political Significance of COSATU' which appeared in *Transformation 5* in 1987 and was itself a response to a debate piece by Martin Plaut in *Transformation 2*. I shall argue that the characterisation by von Holdt of the pre-1985 Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) as an essentially 'workerist' federation is both empirically wrong and, with regard to urban struggles, conceals more than it reveals. It will be argued that there is in fact an essential continuity in the philosophy, structure and practice of FOSATU and COSATU. What was changing was the local, regional and then national experience of mobilisation and organisation in the townships that facilitated the alliance between work-based and community-based political cultures and organisations. The debate was never about whether or not unions should fight for political rights or have alliances with community organisations but how and when to do it without sacrificing internal democracy and working class leadership. A second section will periodise the parallel and intersecting development of work-based and community organisations on a local, regional and national scale while a final section will then draw out a few implications of recent developments in urban politics for national organisation and for the community organisation-trade union alliance strategy. This section will examine at a local level the changes that have occurred since the creation of COSATU.

Workerism: Label or explanatory category

According to von Holdt, unions until 1984 were dominated by 'workerism', an ideology that favoured the separation of unions from the national democratic struggle and the organisations linked to the struggle. Apparently, as a result of their domination by workerist leadership, unions were interested only in 'economic' struggles, believed that trade unions were the only appropriate form of class organisation and, in the absence of "any concrete practical way" to engage workers in political struggle, were "forced to fall back on educational programmes that show how capitalism is the 'real' problem and socialism the 'real' solution." Thus it is not surprising to discover that 'in fact its [the November stayaway of 1984] greatest significance was the role it played in the process of overcoming the deep mistrust sown between unions and community organisation.' (von Holdt, 1987:96)

This characterisation of FOSATU in fact obscures a number of extremely important struggles. The core union members in many FOSATU unions were migrants. The migrant interest in trade unions was a result of the economic collapse of the homelands and the extreme shortage of land there. It had become impossible for migrants to view their stay in towns as a temporary measure. To return to the homelands meant to starve. In the event of a dismissal or retrenchment, migrants would lose not only their jobs but also their access to an urban area. 'Workers with city rights can look for jobs elsewhere - migrants knew they couldn't. Organisation was the only power they had'. (Cited in Friedman, 1987:172)

As a result, migrants showed a particularly keen interest in trade union organisation. The political effect of building working class unity at the level of production was to undermine potential conflicts between migrants and people with permanent rights to live in town. During this period, Steven Friedman has noted two factories organised by the General Workers' Union where workers with city rights volunteered to accept retrenchments in order to save contract workers' jobs. (Friedman, 1987: 294) Most importantly, the organisation of migrants prevented the Wiehahn Commission from entrenching the insider/outsider distinction in relation to the right to work so that the law was changed in 1981 to allow migrants and Bantustan commuters to belong to registered trade unions. This fundamentally affected the economic viability of the migrant labour system and the state's urbanisation policies.

The notion of 'workerism' also does not capture the subtle links between shopfloor demands and broader political struggles. An excellent example of this would be the pension struggles fought by FOSATU in 1981. The preservation of pensions legislation meant that workers would be unable to withdraw their pension contributions until they were fifty-five years old. FOSATU systematically linked up the demand for early withdrawal with a broader understanding of the politics of pensions. FOSATU demanded worker representation on pension funds to ensure that money invested in government stocks was not being used to fund an oppressive military apparatus. FOSATU also noted that pension money was a vital source of growth for the white economy and it was this interest in economic growth that fused state and capital's interest in pension preservation policy. This offers a perfect example of a seemingly apolitical 'production' issue being linked up with broader political issues. Current demands from NUMSA that PAYE not be deducted from workers' wages offers a contemporary parallel linkage between production and broader political issues.

Apart from shunting away the real FOSATU commitment to political engagement, characterising FOSATU as 'workerist' actually obscures the crucial debates that took place in the union movement. In the early eighties, (and the point still has some validity today), there were in fact doubts that the unions could be an effective political force given the size of their organisational base. A strategy of consolidation of shopfloor structures was, and still is, being followed. At no time was doubt about participation in community struggles translated into a principled stand by FOSATU.

The real question from the time of Joe Foster's speech in 1982 was not whether the trade unions were going to get involved in broader political issues but how

they were going to articulate with other organisations without sacrificing internal democracy and the leadership of the working class. How is it possible for von Holdt to assert that these questions were only put on the agenda in 1986? The answer lies in the deficiencies in his methodology. By neglecting social structure, von Holdt confines his analysis to the level of ideology and organisational form. Thus he oscillates tautologically between two arguments: 1) FOSATU was separated from community organisation because of workerists (or workerism) and 2) FOSATU was dominated by a workerist leadership because it was separated from community organisation.

Von Holdt's critique of Plaut is nonetheless a step forward, in particular his critique of Plaut's use of the word 'populism'. "If analysts actually wish to understand what is happening they will have to stop using the concept [I would prefer to use 'term' in place of 'concept'] 'populism' in a way that blinds rather than enlightens, i.e. stop conflating 'populist' with 'popular movement'"(von Holdt, 1987:101) However, von Holdt does not move beyond using the ideological labels of 'workerism' and 'populism' as explanations. As such, he never moves beyond a description of ideologies and organisational forms with the result that labels are being used in place of explanations. Von Holdt never succeeds in overcoming Plaut's framework; he only presents his own preference. What is required instead is an analysis of how ideological struggles over appropriate, popular and coherent strategies actually become determined by broad structural processes and historical experience.

In fact, the creation of COSATU was important in facilitating national trade union organisation and hence in laying down the basis for a national politics. However, the articulation of trade union organisation with community and other political organisations was facilitated by, and the specifics of its structure a result of, the uneven process of mobilisation and organisation in the townships. The uneven developments in the townships ensured that strategies and alliances between unions and community organisations were (and still to an important extent are) shaped at a local level. Such developments resulted in two separate processes impacting on trade union organisation: 1) workers' experience of township repression tended to lead to internal pressure by trade union members to take action of one form or another; and 2) the creation of mass-based coherent community organisation in the townships facilitated a democratic alliance between the trade unions and the community organisations. In some cases, such as on the East Rand or in East London, unions actually filled the gap where community organisation was weak and townships underwent a process of mobilisation. Workers became responsive to new strategies and came to demand greater community intervention by the unions.

The following section of this essay tries to establish a chronology of this shaping process over the last decade and thus contextualises the significance of the shift from FOSATU to COSATU.

Township political culture

1. 1979-1982

Union Organisation: 1980 saw the birth of mass union organisation in the wake of the post-Wiehahn reforms and the illegal strike wave that followed the Wage Campaign. (Despite the outcome of the registration and industrial council debates, almost all FOSATU strikes were illegal until mid 1983). On the East Rand especially, migrants were organised into union structures. FOSATU unions began to form locals in order to forge an active unity amongst affiliates at a grassroots level. Union organisation was still extremely uneven regionally with developments restricted primarily to the Witwatersrand, parts of Natal and the Cape.

Community Organisation: This period saw the creation of a number of different community organisations focussed around the issues of housing, transport, forced removals and rent. These organisations were mostly restricted to local issues and arose as a result of specific crises in specific areas. As yet there was no national experience of mobilisation in the townships aside from school boycotts. These organisations had no uniform structure or democratic procedures. No national organisations existed apart from the Congress of South African Students (COSAS).

Local Links between Unions and Communities: Examples of cooperation would include action around the issue of dismissed workers in the Western and Eastern Cape (the Ford strike). The strategy of the consumer boycott broke down the barriers between workplace and community. Community muscle was used to facilitate factory gains. However, with the exception of SAAWU, the relationship between unions and community groups began to deteriorate as tensions over political culture, and most importantly, the adoption of procedures to follow in making a decision, grew. Yet FOSATU locals embarked in this period on more sustained local community campaigns. In Katlehong, the locals used management in order to pressurise the community council not to demolish shacks. In Brits, the locals formed and established a close working relation with the Brits Action Committee in a struggle against removals. In Springs, the locals maintained constant contact with community groups but this led to shop stewards losing interest because these groups neglected shopfloor issues.

National Organisation: Although FOSATU was a national federation, it remained regionally based and was unevenly developed. It had no uniform strategy to structure the relationship between affiliates and community organisations. Despite the recession, the general secretary, Joe Foster, called for a more political role for FOSATU at the close of this period. Foster offered no substantive advice as to how this role could be structured but he asserted the minimum requirements of internal democracy and worker control.

2. 1983 - August 1984

Union Organisation:In response to the recession, the unions put their energy into consolidation on the shopfloor. FOSATU unions learnt to use the industrial courts and the industrial councils in conjunction with continued grassroots

organising. The result was that the unions expanded despite the recession and maintained militant strike action. Unions without solid grassroots support were systematically smashed by a combination of recession and state-capital offensive against unregistered unions.

Community Organisation: As a result of the government's constitutional proposals and the introduction of the "Koornhof" bills (leading to the creation of autonomous municipal institutions in African townships as well as tighter influx control), a number of community and political organisations sprang up. The UDF was formed in 1983 with approximately 600 affiliates, comprising student, youth, women's, civic, trade union, religious and political organisations. However, they had no uniform structure and essentially reflected local mobilisation experiences. Often they had little mass base and comprised enthusiastic activists who concentrated on the manipulation of symbols. A process of national mobilisation and mass organisation was only really to take off towards the end of 1984.

Local Links Between Unions and Communities: In mid-1983, Chris Dlamini, FOSATU president, successfully led a campaign for Kelloggs to take up local township issues on behalf of the union. Other members of his East Rand local decided to do likewise. The local planned to set up worker committees in the townships to identify community needs and relay them to stewards who would take them up in the plant. These committees were never implemented but the unions soon became a dominant force in some East Rand townships. This strategy was, however, only feasible in those townships where workers predominated. It also accentuated regional political differences within FOSATU (Friedman, 1987:445, 459). Affiliation to the UDF became a key issue, response to which varied depending on different conjunctures. The following paragraphs will look at this issue as it was faced by the General Workers' Union in the Western Cape, by SAAWU in the Eastern Cape, by FOSATU on the East Rand and finally by FOSATU as a national body.

GWU had attempted to build links with community organisations in the Cape following a successful consumer boycott in response to a mass dismissal. However, this alliance soon fell apart. The union felt that community organisations suffered from acute factionalism, lacked any mass base and were dominated by a petty bourgeois leadership, acted unaccountably and gave the unionists no time for report-backs to membership or consultation with themselves, and were generally given to immature negotiating techniques. The General Secretary of the GWU drew a distinction between the developing union political culture that was mass-based, democratic and accountable and community organisation culture that seemed to rotate around a handful of activists and lacked any solid structures of accountability. These divisions were exacerbated by the migrant nature of the GWU worker base. GWU members were poorly educated and earned very low wages. Migrants "...because they felt they were being treated as 'second class citizens' by black politicians, fiercely guarded their political independence and were later more hostile to non-worker political organisations than any other worker group."(Friedman, 1987:269).

By contrast, SAAWU based itself amongst commuter-workers to East London living in Mdantsane, a Ciskei township comprising lowly paid skilled and

semi-skilled workers as well as the unemployed. The alliance between the trade unions and the community was formed around a bus boycott in 1983. Transport became the issue which articulated the inter-relationship of workplace and community struggles. This articulation took on a sustained and organised shape in the safe space provided by commuter trains. Because of the links between the petty bourgeoisie and the Ciskei state, leadership in the community fell relatively easily into the hands of working class activists. Ciskeian state repression removed any ambiguity as to which class interests the state supported. Under these circumstances, SAAWU affiliated comfortably to the UDF as the problems the GWU experienced in the Western Cape were not applicable (Swilling, 1984b).

On the East Rand, FOSATU asked Terror Lekota to address its workers on the issue of UDF affiliation. The main objection raised by workers to affiliation was the lack of a coherent UDF political programme. While the union federation had a clear programme of action starting with the organisation of factories, the UDF leader was unable to tell workers where the Front was in fact going after the anti-tricameral campaign. Workers felt unable to assess the long-term advantages or disadvantages of affiliation and declined to affiliate.

National Organisation: The UDF regional and national committees were forming community-based organisations and training leadership cadres but the first phase of UDF politics was largely reactive and symbolic. It consisted of opposition to the new constitution and the million signature campaign. The relationship to FOSATU therefore remained distant despite the waging of a few symbolic local campaigns. FOSATU organised a separate campaign against the new constitution in which workers passed on a protest message to management. Those unions with Coloured members were involved in boycotting the Coloured elections. Locals did begin to take up community issues on a more systematic basis.

3. August 1984 - November 1985

Community Organisation and the Unions: This period saw a regional process of mobilisation and organisation in the communities that facilitated a coherent and effective alliance between student, civic and trade union organisations coming about. Seekings has described this process for the Transvaal. Prior to 1984, resistance to the housing shortage and rents had been passive, resulting in the proliferation of shacks and the mounting of rent arrears. In early 1984, school boycotts resulted in the formation of well-organised student bodies. The experience of repression soon linked educational issues with broader political issues. Parent-student committees were formed to attempt to solve the crisis. A consumer boycott of Simba Chips as a response to union struggle in Tembisa on the Rand resulted in a close alliance between youth and the FOSATU locals there. The political cultures of the locals and the youth organisations came closer to one another. Rent increases and SADF harassment led to a fusion of educational, civic and factory concerns. This came to fruition first in the Vaal Triangle, where national demands were also mixed in.

Elsewhere, though, tensions remained. In Port Elizabeth, they surfaced when FOSATU affiliates refused to support a stayaway call that turned out to be a great

success. As Friedman points out, it was a FOSATU weakness to organise locally rather than nationally. Combined with their strategy of using trade union channels for taking up community issues, this could explain why as late as 1985 the political attitudes of FOSATU worker leadership differed sharply from region to region. (Friedman, 1987:459)

National Organisation: This marks the period of UDF's organisational coherence. The theme, "From Protest to Challenge: Mobilisation to Organisation" was prioritised as the organisation struggled to cope with the sudden shift of mobilisation to the national scale. This process was made sporadic and uneven by the extent to which township mobilisation remained determined by the specific history of conflict between township dwellers and community councils or Development Boards. As more and more black local governments collapsed, a state of emergency was declared. During the first partial state of emergency in 1985, the state's repressive efforts remained sporadic and ad hoc, failing to destroy community leadership. This allowed for the democratisation of community organisations; the emergency ensured that these had to evolve more and more sophisticated forms in order both to survive and to maintain contact with their constituencies.

With the November, 1984 stayaway, FOSATU had entered national politics and was willing to defend its participation to the hilt. 'If SASOL did not rehire the workers, all 24 unions involved in the unity talks would launch a national legal stoppage; but first they would hold a strike ballot in every one of their plants and allow nearly half a million workers to say that employers could no longer fire them for supporting political goals'. (Friedman, 1987:451) In fact, this action proved unnecessary. On the one hand, regional differences accentuated, following earlier patterns. On the other, this was the phase where the ground was laid for a national union movement in alliance with the UDF.

4. December 1985 - October 1986

National Organisation and the Unions: Two processes occurred during this period in the UDF. Firstly, at a community level, alternative organs of people's power were created. Until the proclamation of the second state of emergency in June, this period was marked by the most systematic process of national mobilisation and organisation South Africa has ever seen. As resistance shifted towards the very structure of black township governance, at least outside the homelands, a national resistance could acquire coherence. Contradictions developing within the urban political economy provided the fundamental context that allowed community organisations to take off. The short phase between the two States of Emergency was used to maximum effectiveness by local organisations. "Evidence that political consciousness in the townships had become increasingly combative emerged during 1986 with the spread of the rent boycott to 54 townships countrywide involving about 500, 000 households and costing the state at least R40 million per month. Significantly, most of the townships hit by rent boycotts are in the Transvaal because since 1985 these communities have been rapidly organised, in some cases on a street committee basis."(Swilling, 1988:105) Secondly, the UDF was beginning to be structured more along the lines of the trade unions in the effort to form tight national

organisations according to defined constituencies, e.g. youth, civic, women. During this period, the organisational coherence of the Front reached its apex.

At the same time, the unions formed COSATU. The structure and constitution of FOSATU generally speaking were adopted by the new federation. Industrial unions would replace general unions. The federation was to be tightly bound by democratic procedures to its members and its policies monitored by regional and local committees. Each union would get votes according to its membership strength. However, conflict as to particular political stances did not disappear at the regional and union level.

The second state of emergency represented a nationally extensive and systematic effort by the state to smash organisation. This involved the detention of leadership right down to street committee level. By October, the second state of emergency had been in operation for four months. A process of national mobilisation had come and gone. COSATU had suffered detentions and repression but it could survive better than community organisations. Pressure on COSATU to fill the vacuum intensified. The state had begun to operationalise a systematic propaganda campaign to discredit COSATU. This context opened up the space for an unprecedented alliance between COSATU and the UDF. This first took the form of the "National United Action Campaign, " organised around national-political, educational, civic and factory issues.

Systematic links : The growth of locals
Before analysing the differences and resulting tensions between the two forms of organisation it is useful to outline briefly the development of shop-steward locals in FOSATU and then COSATU and their attempts to articulate with community organisations. Swilling points out that the incorporation of locals in the federation structure did not meet with unanimous approval at the grass-roots: 'I think, because the thing became powerful, because there were no constitutional restrictions or mandates or things like that where you have to follow the constitution and that and that and that ... then by including it in there ... it's a bit of a mistake. I think it should have been left as it was - controlled by the shop stewards and not elected people that are sitting on the R.E.C., the Congress etc ... so that guys can make decisions and act now. So now they have to push the things through those channels and up to the top body and then down. This is time consuming' (Unionist quoted in Swilling, 1983:38). In this quote we can see the tensions between the bureaucratised workplace political practice and the need for immediate action felt by militant workers but far more central to community issues. Did the formation of COSATU resolve these tensions?

In an informative and insightful study, Jabu Matiko comes to the conclusion that there remains an essential continuity between FOSATU and COSATU locals: 'COSATU endorsed a process that was already occurring.... Basically, all the features that existed in the FOSATU locals have been transferred to COSATU locals' (Matiko, 1987:39). While tensions have emerged as a result of the unification of FOSATU with other unions in the creation of COSATU, these are not a result of conflict as to involvement in community issues, but centre around the nature of representation. The absence of industrial shop steward structures in some affiliates have led to the accusation that shop stewards from

these affiliates are not attending the locals as genuine representatives but as individuals. This has led to a deterioration in participation in locals by the ex-FOSATU unions.

Yet the resolution taken at the second COSATU conference reaffirmed commitment to developing permanent structures with community organisations. "According to COSATU leadership the exact nature of the link and permanent structures is largely left to the locals. However, the general view is that locals will continue to meet as locals and will not be disbanded in favour of permanent structures and secondly that we are looking to organise sectors being youth, women, unemployed and civics'" (Matiko, 1987:41). Clearly, the formation of COSATU does not mean an end to an independent working class organisation but how are links between the unions and community organisations forged?

There remains debate within the locals as to the exact nature of the union's articulation with the community. In certain areas the locals have been a driving force in setting up community organisations. A process of consultation between the locals and these organisations was then implemented when a matter of common concern arose. In the Johannesburg region, the local forged a working relationship with the UDF area committee. Delegations from the local would attend meetings of the area committee and vice versa. However, both organisations would take decisions separately according to their own particular procedure. In other areas a more permanent relationship was constituted with representatives of community organisations attending all the meetings of the locals. However, this has led to problems as factory issues were often neglected.

Clearly, there is no single ideal structure which will always offer a trouble-free articulation between union and community organisation. As Matiko concludes: 'The development of local structures has assumed a volatile form. Repeated shifts in character and orientation in accordance with specific conditions took place in various locals. No doubt this tradition of reactive response and adaption will continue' (Matiko, 1987:45).

Two political cultures?

So far this paper has concentrated on structural processes that have facilitated an alliance between trade unions and community organisations at different levels. However, political culture cannot be reduced to structure although it is profoundly affected by the context within which it emerges. This section will begin to make more explicit some of the other determinant variables, implicit or ignored in the previous section.

The growth of trade unionism has generated specific working class political culture. This culture is centred around tight bottom-up local, regional and national structures, accountability and rigid democratic procedures and mandates. A lengthy process of consultation and debate takes place at all levels of the union structures before decisions are taken. The resulting of this culture has been facilitated by the post-Wiehahn reforms which gave unions a relatively safe legal space in which to organise. The factories provide a consistent physical space in which the unions can operate. However, national coordination is also facilitated and given legal protection through the process of industry-wide bargaining or negotiations with nation-wide companies.

There is a fundamental unity in union strategy despite some noteworthy internal differences. The difference between the UDF unions and FOSATU represented a difference between two union organising traditions, although it has significantly diminished with the creation of COSATU. Different sectors within the movement are facing different conditions and different sections of the working class. These unions have forged different short-term and long-term tactics. However, union strategy remains uniform throughout: the creation of mass democratic work-based organisations. It is this strategy that gives the movement its coherence.

In contrast, community organisations do not have an equivalent space in which to operate. Meetings at all levels are often necessarily held in a clandestine manner, especially since the declaration of the state of emergency. As a result, leadership often makes decisions without going through formal procedures or channels of communication. Seekings makes this point when comparing organisation in the schools and in the youth congress. 'TOYCO [Tumahole Youth Congress] by contrast, does not require a continually mobilised constituency. Its activities can remain elitist, in terms of decision-making, as long as they match up to residents' grievances and there are channels for communication (for example, through personal contact in the shebeens, or leafletting)' (Seekings, 1986:90).

At regional and national levels, decisions are not made by organisational representatives coming to meetings with strict mandates. 'At the very least, leadership is responsible for thorough and ongoing political assessment at a national level and for outlining a range of options and responses that may be fed back into the various affiliates. This does not grow spontaneously in a simple one-way fashion from the day-to-day concerns of affiliates, and at its ideal serves to enhance and give direction to their ongoing campaigns' (Bloch, 1986:27). Hence the need for political centres. "By 'political centres' we are referring to organisational collectives that are capable of providing political leadership, that are able to strategise, to lead. Political centres are collectives that do not simply react to one crisis after another. They are able to plan ahead, carrying the struggle to the enemy on the people's terms..." (*Phambili*, 1988:21). Although the UDF is structured in a top-down manner, it thus does not impose its decisions on its affiliates. Campaigns are decided on a national scale after a thorough assessment of each local situation. They are then implemented locally according to the political culture that has emerged in a particular region. No coercion is needed in this process as strategies generated by regional and national committees will (usually at least) make sense to local organisation. In this way the democratic integrity of the affiliates is maintained.

However, simply emphasizing this difference in organising approach can obscure major differences in the role and aims of organisation. Central to trade union concerns and unity are the politics of transformation, "building tomorrow today" on the most systematic basis possible. This involves the transformation of pre-existing organising principles and practices within working class culture into democratic principles. The aim of organisation is to generate experiences from which membership would learn their power as a specific class. It transcends protest politics in that it involves both a critique of the present and

the creation of an alternative structure.

The UDF, on the other hand, was created out of a tradition of protest politics. This involved mass mobilisation using already existing popular symbols. This reactive process predominated in the early years of the UDF. Violent confrontations structured the relationship between the youth in particular and the state (as opposed to drawn out negotiations).[1] As mobilisation turned to organisation, issues related to transformation became more central to UDF affiliates' concerns. Street committees, area committees and centralised civics with rigourous procedures of accountability began to replace loose elitist committees. However, this process was extremely uneven. As Moses Mayekiso comments in a recent interview: 'You find that some organisations exist in name - for example some civics are just a civic of two people. Like the old civic in Alexandra which had no structures at all, but they were affiliated. UDF would think they had a strong affiliate, but it was an affiliate of only two people' (Mayekiso, 1989:39).

Even this uneven progress came to a halt with the second state of emergency on the ground. It is worth noting that in certain UDF affiliates the issues of transformation have more recently been confronted in theory. For example, according to a document outlining the policy of the South African Health Workers Congress. '"Health in the hands of the People' signifies empowerment of our people in the field of health. People's health is a developmental process involving our entire communities which are under tremendous onslaught from the State through Apartheid Capitalism, its draconian laws and presently the State of Emergency. Reform is not enough, we in the mass democratic movement and progressive health worker organisations, need to generate radical alternatives in health; as part of the creation of a new society health will be 'people orientated' and not 'profit motivated', as it is in a capitalist society" (SAHWCO, 5).

This difference in conditions of existence, historical experience and organisational approach was a major source of tension between unions and community organisation. On the one hand, transformative organisation sees the organisational process as both a means and an end. However slow or tedious, transformative organisation insists that the members do the job for themselves. They must learn a lesson in self-reliance, independence and power. On the other hand, loose committee-based organisations were attempting to establish themselves as both a viable and legitimate alternative to local authorities. While moving beyond pure protest politics, at this stage these committees were more concerned with achieving some results and channeling community anger than with establishing long-term alternative structures. Hence the message sent to the community was an ambiguous one: Either 'This committee is the alternative to the local authority. Come to us to solve your problems' or 'Alternatives to the local authority are possible. It is your responsibility to become part of the alternative'. To a unionist coming from a transformative tradition, with particular assumptions about the role and aims of organisation, a community organisation that took the former option as the model of organisation seemed elitist even if they tried to meet residents' grievances. As one small body of people replaced another as the key actors in the political process, dependency and disempowerment for the masses remained.

If an organisational elite is established as a means of creating the conditions under which transformative organisation can exist (which is possibly the role the UDF has allocated to 'political centres'), the issues change from the role and purpose of organisation to the role of leadership under different and changing organisational conditions. In communities which have never been organised or whose experience of organisation has been negative, a model of successful organisation may first need to be actualised in order to create legitimacy for the organisation and an atmosphere of confidence in the community. However, such a model is only a tactic to demonstrate new possibilities to the community. It is the starting point of organisation, not the goal. Having moved beyond a reactive process of establishing organisation, by taking the initiative, organisations will be able to structure the terrain on which they operate more effectively. Having created the conditions under which it can emerge, a long-term transformative organisation can be slowly constructed with the necessary transfer of skills and power from an elite of organisers to the ordinary members and their elected leaders. From such a perspective, the UDF's 'political centres' could play a crucial role in facilitating the establishment of transformative organisation on a national scale. This development would lead to a rapprochement between the two political thrusts.

However, so long as the assumptions underlying organisation remain implicit, the space remains for organisational tension between unions and community organisation on procedural lines. A detailed short, medium and long-term political programme drawn up by the working class as a whole, i.e. by both unions and the community, is essential in order to create the conditions where there can be both an explicit and implicit unity of purpose to the unions and the community. The process of drawing up the programme, and the programme itself will provide a long overdue guide and point of reference for political organisation. The direction organisations take would then be determined by the programme, not by a reactive process to state initiatives.

However, on a practical note, is there not more space within the shop-floor tradition for trade-unions to structure their relationship with community organisations? Is there not a more systematic method trade unions can use in assessing and establishing community organisations? What is being suggested is that the trade unions themselves provide the organisers which can establish or strengthen community organisations. In other words, what space could a "trade union community organiser" fill? These organisers would have the responsibility of researching distinctive problems faced by their members in particular communities. Projects could then be put to their members for negotiations with management. In this way management would start to take up 'social responsibility' programmes on workers' terms. State action against such projects would only further isolate them from capital as well as the unions and the community. Community participation and the establishment of community structures to plan and manage such a project would be non-negotiable. Possibly, within the relatively sheltered environment that such a project can provide, it would be possible to establish sustained community organisation ordered around the principle of transformation.

Conclusion

The relationship between trade unions and community organisations cannot be taken at face value, i.e. at the level of ideologies, as does von Holdt. These ideologies form the object, not the means, of explanation. A number of factors structure the relationship between unions and the community and different sectors within the community, namely the political economy in the townships, approaches to mobilisation and organisation, the state of factory organisation, the extent of state intervention and repression, and how different actors identify themselves, i.e. the political culture that has emerged within the factories and the community.

It is suggested that the debate move away from labelling towards questions related to the role of leadership within the context of changing organisational conditions. Leadership, even maintaining contact with the grass-roots but doing the job themselves, could be viewed as a source of disempowerment from a transformative perspective. Such a perspective would demand that organisation become a learning process about the effectiveness of united and democratic mass action. Hence, organisation becomes both a means and an end in itself. Under certain conditions present in the townships where activities are confronted by brutal and arbitrary state violence, it might seem romantic to suggest that conditions are conducive to the emergence and functioning of transformative organisation. However, if leadership working in all contexts accepts the principle of establishing long-term transformative organisations, then many of the short-term problems in structuring an environment conducive to the establishment of transformative organisation would only have tactical status. It is argued that a detailed political programme would enhance the feasibility of these organisations taking off on a national scale.

However, the last word must go to Mayekiso: 'We should support all the progressive organisations that are trying to thrash out answers to the future of this country. Not to point fingers in saying they are populist or whatever. Some people term the organisations that are involved in community struggles and political struggles as populist organisations. Ultra-leftism is always saying that the populist this and that. That is wrong. We should work together. We should be in one pot and destroy apartheid and go further. Labels control debates and delay progress. That is why we say, Down with sectarianism!' (Mayekiso, 1989:50).

NOTE

1. A special note should also be made of one of the UDF's major constituencies, the youth. Urban youth culture had its own style, rules, hierarchies and symbols. This culture has arisen from the day-to-day concerns the youth are facing in the townships. The township terrain, exposed to brutal state action, is probably the worst learning environment for organisers to establish non-violent, long-term youth organisations. A massive effort will be required to transform these day-to-day responses into a culture organised around a long term political programme.

REFERENCES

Bloch,G (1986)   -'The UDF-a National Political Initiative' in *Work in Progress*,41.
Erwin A (1981)   - Unity in Struggle, *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 1.
Friedman,S (1987)   - *Building Tomorrow Today*, Ravan.
Matiko,J (1987)   -'COSATU Locals' in *South African Labour Bulletin*, 12(8).

Mayekiso, M   - Interview in *South African Labour Bulletin*, VoL 14, No. 2, 1989.
                       Phambili, Municipal Elections, 1988.
Seekings,J (1988)   - 'The Origins of Political Mobilisation in the PWV Townships 1980-84' in
                       William Cobbett & Robin Cohen,eds-*Popular Struggles in South Africa*
                       (Sheffield & London).
Seekings,J (1986)   - 'The Anvil:The Politics of Township Conflict' (unpublished BA Hons
                       dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand).
South African Health Workers Congress, *People's Health*, 1988.
Swilling M (1983)   - *The Politics of Working Class Struggles in Germiston 1979-1983*,
                       Unpublished.
Swilling,M (1984a)   - 'The Politics of Working Class Struggles in Germiston 1979-80' (paper
                       delivered to History Workshop,Johannesburg)
Swilling,M (1984b)   - '"The Buses Smell of Blood":The East London Boycott' in *South African
                       Labour Bulletin*,9(5).
Swilling,M (1988)   - 'The United Democratic Front and Township Revolt" in William Cobbett &
                       Robin Cohen,eds-*Popular Struggles in South Africa*(Sheffield & London).
von Holdt,K (1987)   - 'The Political Significance of COSATU' in *Transformation*,5.
Webster,E and Lambert,R (1987) - *The re-emergence of political unionism*, University of the
                       Witwatersrand, African Studies Institute paper No. 208.
Webster, E   - *The Rise of Social Movement Unionism*, (Forthcoming).