



The UDF at 40:

A commemoration with lessons and portents

By Bruce Kadalie

Bruce Kadalie is Research Coordinator at the Institute for African Alternatives.

At the Institute for African Alternatives' (IFAA's) commemoration of 40 years since the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF), struggle veterans on the panel shared more than their memories; they listened to young people in the audience berating the current generation of leaders, and sympathised with their anger and frustration. BRUCE KADALIE, who chaired the discussion, shares his observations.

The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) notes a curious detail in South Africa's historical calendar of the progressive Left; the third year of every decade appears to have a peculiar overload of decennial anniversaries. Indeed 2023 includes the 110th year of the notorious Natives Land Act; the centenary of our perennial national bane, Eskom; the centenary of the South African Native National Congress's (SANNC's) transformation to the African National Congress (ANC); 80 years since the founding of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM); 50 years since

the massive Durban workers' strikes as well as the formation of the South African Council on Sport (SACOS) and 40 years since the founding of the behemoth United Democratic Front (UDF), the broad mass movement that is generally credited with bringing the apartheid government to its knees and ushering in the democratic era.

The story of the UDF is of course well documented. The launch event in 1983 was the culmination of a set of consultations across the nation. Although it was launched in Cape Town, that was actually not the favoured location, mainly due to the perception that it had too many ideological factions on the Left who may disrupt the event.

As it turned out that was not the case. It suffices to quote J. Brooks Spector writing in the Daily Maverick on the UDF's 30th anniversary in 2013: "a broad, diverse coalition of groups and individuals could be held together – despite institutional differences, arrests, banning orders and differences in ideology – to put sustained, ultimately successful pressure on an odious regime."

IFAA, together with Andre Marais of Surplus Books, held a UDF commemoration on 9 May 2023. Initially we conceived of it (deliberately) as a platform for the panellists to speak anecdotally about the space and time of the UDF's establishment in August 1983. The plan was to immerse us in the *zeitgeist* of 40 years ago and then allow

the questions of legacy and relevance to flow from discussion.

Given the impact of the UDF on our individual lives and trajectories, we were looking for the most effective way to create a flowing and productive intergenerational discussion about the profound legacy of this movement. This might have been rather naïve on our part because even in the planning of this event we could feel something different this time around.

Clearly, as the South African nation's erstwhile love affair with a corrupt and unaccountable ANC ruling party rapidly dissipates, and given the country's crumbling infrastructure, energy crisis and the Zondo Commission's revelations on state capture, there is much more focus and poignancy to discussions about the legacy of the UDF.

In the brief build-up to the event, questions and utterances appeared on social and other media. What has happened to us since "liberation" in 1991 (when the UDF ended)? Should the then incoming ANC, as the government to be, have demobilised the UDF so radically? Was the dismantling of the alliance between grassroots-based civic organisations, NGOs, faith-based movements, youth movements and trade unions an historically underestimated, if not overlooked, pivot that caused the weak and dishevelled state of these organisations today? Should we look at these elements of our past to find the causes of our abiding ►►



sense that we are a nation in decline, alienated and adrift from our political leaders? Are we just engaging in “what could have been” and “what should have been” nostalgia borne of decades-long pent-up frustration?

In a tightly-chaired panel discussion, the speakers moved straight from their personal reflections to the legacy of the UDF in the current South African political malaise. Highlights from the panel included founding patron Allan Boesak’s call for a “revival of the spirit of the UDF”; given the palpable anger of people at grassroots level today, the time is right for a movement similar to the UDF of the 1980s, he suggested.

This is the “time [for] no longer sentimentalising, no longer romanticising, not any nostalgia ... a time for taking shape and taking back our future from the hands of those who have messed it up so thoroughly,” he implored the audience.

Former chair of the Cape Youth

Congress (Cayco), Roseberry Sonto reminisced that 40 years ago the digital world was not in existence, the technology of activism had barely begun to emerge, and print was the primary method of subversion. Sonto, who was due to be on the panel but had to withdraw at the last minute due to unforeseen circumstances, said on Cape Talk radio in an interview ahead of the event that at the time the airwaves were tightly controlled by the apartheid regime. Word-of-mouth, taking to the streets and physical gatherings were primary.

Veteran activist Shirley Gunn complimented this by emphasising the ingenuity, innovation and creativity of the times. For instance, struggle propaganda was silkscreened and printed on thousands of T-shirts with the help of agencies such as the Community Arts Project and local small businesses, church groups and others who donated money, work spaces and equipment.

Former ANC MP Pregs Govender said the lessons learnt from the solidarity between movements and the integrity of these groups, especially women’s movements, during the anti-apartheid struggle should inspire new generations of activists who wish to bring about societal change today. “We have all grown and developed; we all took the lessons from one stage to the next and I think that is the essence of what is needed right now,” she said.

Q&A time drew some sharp and also angry comments from activist members of the audience, clearly highlighting the sense of frustration, loss and betrayal that people feel, sensibilities that were fully acknowledged by the panellists. This was just the beginning of the critically necessary public conversations that must happen in the upcoming series of UDF commemorations in the run-up to 20 August, the day that saw the UDF launched in Mitchell’s Plain, Cape Town 40 years ago. **NA**