



The de-mobilisation of Action Kommandant¹

The United Democratic Front, popular democracy and the ANC

– By Robert Van Niekerk

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When the ANC was unbanned it sought to demobilise grassroots democracy. In disbanding the United Democratic Front, the ANC turned its back on the insurgent non-racialism that had emerged in the 1980s, argues ROBERT VAN NIEKERK. It opted instead for a neo-liberal strategy of economic development and elitist democracy.²

The Zondo Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (2022) laid bare the evisceration of South African state capacity through unchecked plunder by apparatchiks (or cadres) in the ruling ANC and its collaborators in the private sector. This denouement can be traced to the early 1990s where the moral and political decay of the ANC became evident with the emblematic injunction by senior leaders of government such as the then deputy-minister Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka that “Black businessmen should not be shy to say they wanted to become ‘filthy rich’” (*News24 Business*: 2005; Taylor, 2016: 35).

Institutions of the state were already by then being re-purposed for private accumulation by ‘deployed’ cadres of the ANC as evidenced in the 1998 arms deal debacle, for example. Some of the mechanics of such ‘cadre deployment’ were subsequently revealed in detail by the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture (2022).

The question we ask is to what extent did the concessions made by an ANC leadership during South Africa’s negotiations establish a path dependency that significantly contributed to this unfolding catastrophe. Furthermore, what can be learnt 30 years into democracy about the demobilisation of the internal mass movement (the United Democratic Front [UDF] and the progressive trade union movement), which offered an alternative democratic politics of equity to the politics of elitism and enrichment of the post-1994 ANC leadership? The urgency of the need to understand this demobilisation and how profoundly this shaped the country’s policy decisions leading to this dire situation is reflected in a World Bank report released in 2022 that confirmed that South Africa is still the most unequal of 164 countries measured.

The significance of the UDF and its progressive character lies in what Suttner (2004: 695) has described as its “pre-figurative democracy” with a discourse – even if often unevenly applied – of popular democracy or “people’s power” involving the exercise of agency at a community level around civil, political and social rights (education, health, housing) and building a common society. The popular democratic mobilisation also comprised a grassroots alliance of non-racial, multi-class social forces in 600 organisations by 1988. Cohered around securing universal democracy but with a longer term programmatic commitment to implementing the Freedom Charter – at minimum a social democratic programme (Padayachee and Van Niekerk, 2019) – constituted a foundation for developing an organic, re-distributive and radical social democratic project from below.

The key contribution of the UDF until its disbanding was that it inculcated a self-belief in ordinary people, predominantly impoverished, that they could determine their own political and economic destiny through practices of direct democracy and community mobilisation. The complex politics of the UDF and Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) has been given attention (see Houston [1999]; Van Kessel [2000], Seekings [2000] and Suttner [2004]). It reveals – even if contradictorily – the appetite of members in the UDF for engagement on policy decisions that would fundamentally impact on their future lives. The UDF articulated a critique of the liberal parliamentary representation. For *New Era*, a Cape Town publication affiliated to the UDF, democracy



meant “the ability of the broad working masses to participate in and control all dimensions of their lives”, not just “some liberal pluralistic debating society” (Cited in Good, 2014: 69).

As argued by Suttner, an influential education and training convenor of the UDF,

there is no doubt that the popular power period gave people a sense and the practical lived reality of their own capacity to run their own lives, albeit on a small scale, in particular communities. This did not happen in all communities. Sometimes or often, for there is insufficient data to quantify, such successes coexisted with neighbouring communities failing to attempt, or attempts to build popular power collapsing for one or other reason. In the cases where there was success, this was often based on local structures like street committees, zone committees, area committees, which were not ANC or UDF structures or intended to be that. Where they operated successfully in some communities, they did not purge non-ANC or non-UDF people. They generally worked best and the principle on which they tended to operate in the successful cases was through being non-sectarian and not demanding that members of street committees, area committees or other organs of popular power should be members of UDF affiliates (Suttner, 2023).

UDF central leadership had a tenuous hold since its affiliates grew rapidly with hundreds of townships joining or simply declaring themselves as UDF. From the very beginning, Allan Boesak suggested “the UDF knew (and the ANC feared) that much action in the course of struggle was perforce going to be spontaneous, unplanned and uncontrolled” (Boesak, quoted in Good, 2014: 66).

This self-belief in the diverse ranks of the impoverished in their capacity to effect change in their community through civics, youth and worker organisations and action committees was lost with the closure of the UDF in 1991 and the rapid rise of the (un)democratically centralist parliamentary party politics of the unbanned ANC post-1991. The evidence suggests the ANC changed its class orientation from the oppressed to the mainly White ruling class whom it set out to appease. The ANC took a bet that such appeasement would lead to increased business confidence and investment by old order capital (Arrighi and Scully, 2010).

As argued by the third president of the Congress of South African Students (Cosas), Shepi Mati:

The UDF really was an important forum to express kind of a multi-class interest of forces that were opposed to apartheid, that had everything to gain in the demise of apartheid. So, in that sense, it was this broad front. But in a second sense, it was also a platform to begin to shape the kind of society, or have a conversation about

the kind of society, that South Africans wanted to live under. And in that respect, of course, the departure point for many of the organisations who were members of the UDF, was the Freedom Charter. There may well have been members of the UDF who, in time, got to appreciate the values of the Freedom Charter, but perhaps initially may not have. And then, of course, at any one time as a front, as a broad front, its strength lay in the strength of its constituent elements, and the working class was an important element in that – what later became Cosatu [Congress of South African Trade Unions] was kind of an important ally in that struggle. So, I think for me it kind of represented or embodied this cross-class mobilisation – the building of a new sort of solidarity that was already foreseen and expressed in the perspectives of the ANC, whether it is the Morogoro document or even the Freedom Charter itself expressed that. (Interview, 12 February 2022)

The achievement of meaningful, materially rooted non-racialism as opposed to a merely symbolic non-racialism also allowed for a nurturing and future emergence of a core social democratic objective: the financial de-segregation through universal provision by a democratic state of public goods such as health and education, utilised by all classes and social groups.

In the context of the mass, national struggle against apartheid laws and spearheaded by the youth and students there were also greater forms of subversive social mixing occurring across the group areas racial divide: in the Western Cape Black African youth were attending mass gatherings centred on student and consumer boycotts and joint organisational meetings in Coloured and Indian and White areas and vice versa under the umbrella of the UDF. The embryo of future community leaders of the society, they were forming social bonds based on radical political objectives and unevenly but steadily breaking down the racialised ‘othering’ that was at the core of segregation and apartheid, in the actual practice of joint struggles over shared community interests to decent housing, health and education.

In a similar vein, the late Johnny Issel, a UDF founder member, lead organiser, uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) activist and selfless comrade on the UDF socialist left observed:

It is important to consider the values which underlined those selfless deeds during the eighties. We need to examine the values which inspired those comrades to reach such high levels of commitment. Since the coming of the nineties, things seem to change within our country.

A new culture arrived with the nineties. It brought and legitimated the “market”. And in a very short space of time it took control of practically every aspect of our lives. Though the market had been with us for a long time it remained condemned, the



domain of decadent White society. And whereas some of us were quite sceptical about it at the beginning, we eventually succumbed.

Today it regulates and controls all of our lives. It determines how we conduct our politics Our public appearances are carefully choreographed. These are the requirements of the market. It demands that we present ourselves as saleable commodities.

As functionaries we are required to possess a certain measure of exchange value, like any other commodity for sale. And better if it is “packaged” in an Italian-designed suit and driven in a German-produced automobile ... Some of us discover that we are not appropriately packaged. And we begin to doubt our own worth, our own self-worth. Others seem to find somewhat more expedient ways, albeit criminal ways, to appropriate what the market has to offer.

In our market society everyone looks out for himself ... Very different from the tenets held and forged during the camaraderie. Very different from the values that inspired the likes of Vuyisile Mini, or Mntuli ka Sezi, or Neil Aggett, or Anton Frans [Fransch]. (Issel, Interview, 2003)³

Mati recalls how membership of the ANC was reduced to rubber stamping decisions already being taken at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa), such as the ANC endorsing chieftaincies:

There were people who had built democratic traditions inside the country: UDF, street committees, trade unions, Cosatu – they had built all those... And I think the regrouping [of the ANC] simply ignored it. ... Our leadership is negotiating in Kempton Park..., so then we'll get a call that – ... and I remember [the issue] was traditional leaders – what do we do with traditional leaders and so on. Then we have a meeting in [the local ANC branch] and we're sitting in [the] meeting and I think in that meeting Jack Simons was still explaining to us how they dealt with the traditional leaders and chiefs in Zambia.

(But) for me, I always subscribe to that position of a ceremonial role for traditional leaders, definitely not a political role, because these people are not elected, they are not accountable to anybody, and democratic structures must take precedence over any of those things. Then ... somebody comes late [to the branch meeting] ... and says, “*haaiibo*, comrade, you are still discussing this? The position has been taken. I was watching TV news, that's why I was late [for the branch meeting],” because our meetings were scheduled to coincide just before the television news. So now people were sitting to watch

the news and then they come to the [branch] meeting, they already know that it is a waste of time, what we are going to be discussing. And for me, that's really the moment that I just felt that "No, there's something we're not doing right".

Leaders know best: Paternalism and the contempt for grassroots democracy

It was not only the corrosive market individualism described so well by Issel that became the ANC's disease of the 1990s but also a contempt for grassroots democracy and an arrogant derision of those who refused to "buy in". The ANC's exiled leadership elite were intent on establishing a different trajectory which was premised on an accommodation through de-racialisation of the racial capitalist order. This was not aimed at addressing class inequality but aimed at the more residual, liberal goal of 'poverty alleviation' and addressing Black exclusion from the commanding heights of the system of capitalism. Finding its apotheosis in the 'non-negotiable' adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic policy framework in 1996 (Padayachee & Sherbut, 2011: 627), the ANC elite was prepared to abandon the working class and ignore its worker-based allies. Echoing Issel, Ruiters (2020) argues:

For Mbeki, fighting for racial justice was about 'growing the economy' while getting the 'poor' into 'normal participation in the economy' that would stop their 'dependency on grants'. In 2007, in his State of the Nation address, Mbeki reminded South Africans they must continuously focus on the task to ensure that as many of our people as possible graduate out of dependence on social grants and enter the labour market. ANC leaders have embraced their own 'market-civilizing mission' as the structure and language of the commodity and the logic of capital became deeply embedded in policy statements.⁴

As observed by Taylor (2016: 35), "GEAR itself might be described as reflecting and reinforcing the embourgeoisement of the ANC elites and their allies, the Black bourgeoisie, which has less and less disputes with the old [White] social order and a greater appetite to join it."

This furthermore represented an abandonment of:

... accountability and accompanying political selflessness, all key features of the progressive mass democratic movement in the struggle against apartheid. In other words that if there was a 'sell-out' it was of our grassroots, mass democratic political culture. (Padayachee and Van Niekerk, 2019: xiv)

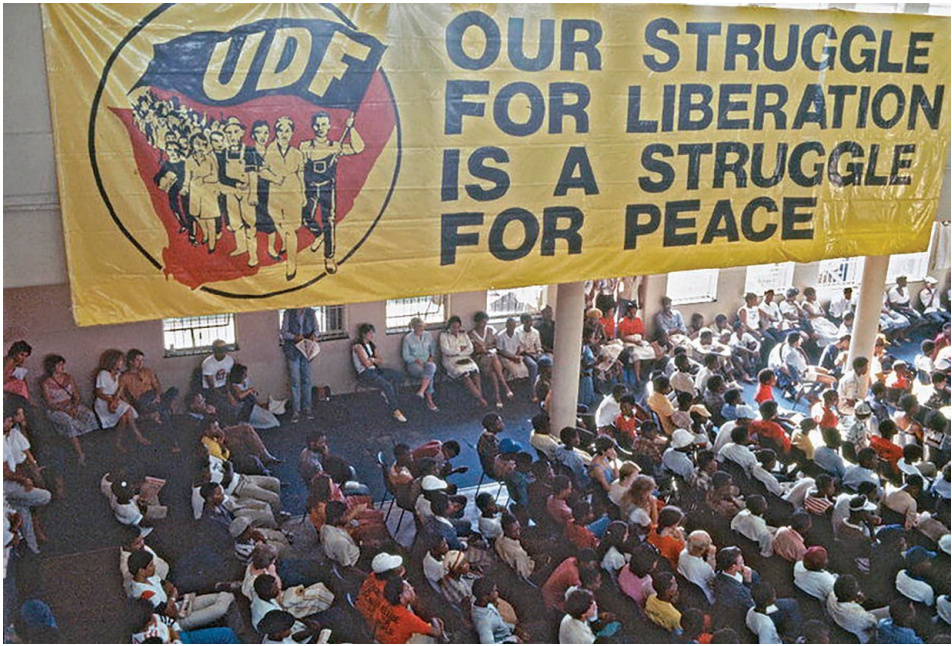


Insurgent non-racialism versus a moribund four nations thesis

If the UDF could be characterised as pre-figuring a new, non-racial democratic polity with the economic and social liberation of the Black oppressed and exploited working-class at its core then it also opened radical possibilities for de-colonising and fundamentally transforming South African society. But as Mati notes:

“There (was) externally... a lot of pressure from capital to conclude this thing and to conclude it in a way that doesn’t upset the fundamental structures of society. So, it [the ANC] was given political power, but it [Capital] did not concede on economic levers of power, so to speak. So, there was that pressure, it’s constant and it’s also happening at an ideological level. Communism has failed – just look at what happened in Eastern Europe ... And then there’s the regime as well, which is unleashing violence, just making it impossible for us to meet democratically and discuss and talk about the solutions to our country’s problem, whether we meet street by street and whatever. There was a lot of reliance on brilliant individuals who were gathered around the negotiation table, who could lead us in the process. And then our (role) was just now to fold arms and then wait for the process to unfold with the hope that these are our leaders, they’ve come back, and they know what is right for us and so on. So that’s what we were led into – a process where the leadership knows ... Maybe there’s something that they are seeing that we don’t see because of where they are positioned. And it was these things that were just making it impossible sometimes to contest. And of course, there’s an element of fatigue as well which had taken root; a lot of people were exhausted through the process of struggle because it takes its own toll, emotionally, at an individual, kind of personal level for individuals. So, all of these elements just made it for a kind of a process that resulted in 1994 and then eventually in the elections.”

It was around its unbanning that we also see the ANC returning with archaic multi-racial ‘Congress Wheel’ memory politics of the era of the 1960s from Robben Island and from exile. This failed to appreciate either the depth or possibilities and processes of this materially rooted agenda of insurgent non-racialism under construction and which was directly informed by the psychologically emancipatory politics of Black Consciousness and progressive worker mobilisation of the 1970s. The ANC commandeered the emancipatory infrastructure painstakingly established by the diverse, multi-organisation UDF primarily for its electioneering and organisational consolidation purposes – a return to the politics of symbolism by an unbanned ANC and for which there was also a mass appeal.



Shepi Mati expressed this organisational displacement of an insurgent non-racialism and its subversive social mixing as follows:

And [the ANC] didn't even take into account how the UDF was organised, because it was not only organised at a street level, but [in] area committees. And all those areas were organised in a particular way that allowed people, over time, to get to know each other – there were people that you would know ... you'll meet them at an area committee meeting of the UDF, and you'd connect with so and so ... there was a structure there. And when the ANC was rebuilt, the [ANC] branches just upset all of that, didn't take into account all of that. And they redrew those boundaries and new people now, you didn't even know. ... You say, "man, where was this person? They are members of the ANC?" ... Whereas with the UDF, we knew those people, because the UDF had built a network and some level of intelligence, that it understood who's who. Would we really have this problem that we have with all the issues of local government and the weaknesses [if we had maintained the system of grassroots accountability originally established by the UDF]? (Interview, 12 February 2022)



UDF leader and patron Allan Boesak also recounts the dissonance felt with ANC leadership figures in relation to the new politics of insurgent non-racialism that the UDF was forging in communities. In discussion with Mandela, he observed the following:

So, when Mandela came out, you will remember the first shocking thing was how casually he brought back the old racial terms, that from the Black Consciousness days and into the UDF we had completely done away with. I mean, all of a sudden, he talked to me. And he recognised me as a 'Coloured leader'. And I was saying to him, what is that? I've never been referred to [as that] ... the only places that refer to me as a 'Coloured leader' was *Die Burger* and *Rapport* [Afrikaans newspapers]. (T)hat's the only language they understand, but in our circles ... it was a shock, because I did not know that the African National Congress still thought in those terms, but then I discovered they never forgot those terms. I mean, that was the only language the ANC knew.

And then [Mandela] argues for that and then he says ... what one must never forget how important it is that all those distinctive features are there ... of the colour of your skin, the texture of your hair, size of your nose. And he says this as if he doesn't know how like an apartheid apostle he sounded. Wow. I mean, what is the difference between Mandela and Andries Treurnicht [Afrikaner leader of the White supremacist Conservative Party] when you hear things like that, absolutely. (Interview, Feb 3, 2022)

This position of racial reification by the ANC leadership as represented here by Mandela and which the UDF had assiduously tried to break down in its political practices across Black communities was then further re-inforced organisationally by the post-1990 unbanned ANC through a willingness to seek allyship with dis-credited political figures who collaborated with the de-legitimated, apartheid governance structures:

Clearly, they came out of ... Robben Island and maybe out of their discussions, [and thought] that it would be essential in order to win the full support of the so called Coloured people to bring in the Alan Hendricks [Coloured political collaborator with the racially exclusive White Tri Cameral Parliament] of this world. And we had then tried to explain to [Mandela]: these people were not only our sworn enemies and sworn enemies of democracy, you have no idea what ... disgust they have been looked at in the so called Coloured community that we built the UDF ... we ... had so much overwhelming Coloured support, specially from the younger people, because we were so clear about those people and the role that they were playing, and how we were never fooled.

And I shouldn't really mention names, but that is how so many people with the mindset of Coloured politics and the Coloured Representative Council, and their children, were brought into the ANC and given key positions in the African National Congress. (Interview with Allan Boesak, 3 February, 2022)

A related dimension of the ANC's politics of racial reification taking an organisational form was the disbandment of community-based organisations allied to the UDF and its inorganic integration with structures established under the leadership of the unbanned ANC. The author recalls as chair in 1991 of a vibrant branch of 20 consistent core members of the South African Youth Congress (Sayco) in Lansdowne on the Cape Flats that an instructional letter was received from an Interim Chair of the ANC Youth League, Jackie Selebi, saying that their local Sayco branch was to disband, their members were instructed to join the re-established ANC Youth League formed in the neighbouring Athlone region, as 100 members were a minimum requirement to form an ANC Youth League branch. Literally overnight a dynamic, progressive youth organisation first established in the local community in 1980 was disbanded. This same letter was received by all community-based Sayco branches in one form or another.

A statement on the official dissolution of the UDF was released by its National Executive Committee on the 15 August 1991 with rallies announced at the Rocklands Civic Centre in Mitchells Plain, the original launch site, and in Johannesburg. The statement importantly drew attention to the style of organisation the UDF aspired to, indicating that, "[i]ts leadership functioned collectively. In practice it constantly sought mandates from its affiliates and from the communities at large to ensure that its actions were in tandem with the wishes of its constituencies. It endeavoured to give to our people a new experience of democracy. In this context the UDF became an embryo of a new South Africa that we are busy building." The statement also referred to its "trail of achievements" including that it "built unprecedented unity amongst South Africans across race and class" (UDF, 1991, SA History Archive).

The obvious question is given these impressive achievements claimed, why was the UDF not maintained as a fundamental site of democratic practice for a new civil society and the insurgent non-racialism further developed and built upon, as the "embryo" of the new society claimed?

This issue needs further sustained attention to better understand how the mass democratic and workers' movements and aligned left forces were so rapidly de-mobilised and an inclusive, radically humane community-based politics of

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transformation displaced to a self-serving politics of elitism, patronage and money.

An insight is provided by Boesak who attended the UDF dissolution rally, where he counterposed the politics of the UDF with that of the exiled ANC as revealed in the rally, where he was invited to speak alongside Trevor Manuel, Cheryl Carolus and Steve Tshwete amongst other:

All I remember, all I remember about it, it's a funny thing, how the mind works very, because I block out. Because it's such a painful memory. All I remember is Mac Maharaj standing up and saying at the closure of the UDF, "I am a soldier! I've always been a soldier! I'm proud to be a soldier! I stand here today as a soldier!" And I thought, what does that mean, though, for people in the UDF, whose basic philosophy was nonviolent resistance? And maybe that's how you should understand that. So if you don't understand that we are just closing you down as an organisation, we are closing down the philosophy that you stood for. If they had gone on to be more honest and say you [UDF] people believe in the Freedom Charter, we [ANC] are walking away from the Freedom Charter, which they did. They didn't say that. But if they did say that it would have been clearer to all of us. So it was not a day that I felt I covered ...myself in pride [in agreeing to speak at the rally]. And I will always, always, always regret that, although somebody said to me, what do you think you could have actually done about it? Not very much, though. But I could, I could have withheld my cooperation that day [of the dissolution rally]. (Interview, 3 February 2022)

Drawing on similar observations of a militaristic style of engagement in certain exiled ANC members who were appointed into leadership positions, Mati observes the consequences this had for democratic practices:

In the Western Cape, for instance, we had a provincial secretary whose experience had just been as a soldier ... underground before leaving the country, then a soldier outside. And then now you talk to people, you address a public platform [I used to do a lot of coverage of the (ANC political) events as part of Community Video Education Trust (CVET)] to video-document these events. And I could hear this person ... when you address people, you address them as if they are soldiers, you are giving instructions and you're not engaged in a dialogue, you're not engaging through communication and communion with people, because people have ideas and they have solutions to their problems, and they understand, they've built confidence, themselves, in the streets fighting the *boers*, and this is not a military camp that you are

addressing. Anyway, so there was that. So, [the re-integration of the ANC into internal structures] it didn't take into account that we have that military tradition [in the ANC].

The reasons and process leading to the dissolution of the UDF and MDM, which comprised 600 organisations and not all of whom had direct legacy political affiliations to the ANC, needs to be re-excavated and scrutinised so that a fuller account is obtained of how the organic politics of resistance and re-construction as represented by the UDF was shut down.

In this endeavour the provocative argument by political scientist Padraig O'Malley (2007: 247) on the relationship in the 1990s between the returned exiled ANC (and its underground Vula formation) and the internal UDF and MDM needs to be confronted:

The mass movements were creating a mass revolution. Lusaka was trying to gain a foothold, parade its pedigree, invoke Mandela – Madiba went down far better with the masses than with the NEC. In a sense Vula [the ANC's strategy for armed insurrection if the negotiations failed] was subversive. It infiltrated the MDM, used the political underground it harnessed to seduce MDM leaders and hijack its revolution-in-the-making. Although the MDM did not know it, the ANC in exile needed the MDM far more than the MDM needed the ANC (O'Malley, 2007: 247).

How is it that grassroots members of the internal UDF and MDM, who discussed and engaged with complex theoretical papers on liberation theories and insisted that a culture of democratic mandates and accountability inform political practices, subsequently and passively surrendered their agency to 'ANC leaders' to negotiate the economic and social content of their freedom? South African Communist Party (SACP) and MK leader Chris Hani, arguably the most respected leadership figure alongside exiled ANC president Oliver Tambo amongst grassroots members of the MDM, drew attention to the problem of lack of consultation by the ANC leadership with the grassroots membership during the Codesa negotiations (1991-1993) leading to strategic errors of judgement. One significant issue concerned the Boipatong massacre in 1992 where 45 people were killed by Inkatha vigilantes and which led to the ANC withdrawing from the negotiations. Hani reflected that the Boipatong massacre:

... was an important catalyst. It made us [to] sit up and to look critically at our own strategies, at our own tactics, at the path we have traversed, and made the movement [to] participate in soul searching in discovering its own weaknesses, and above all, in realising that negotiations have made us [to] drift away from the people, to drift away from our own base. It was important therefore to take two steps back in order to restore the cohesion, the unity, the togetherness between the leadership and the membership.⁵



To what extent this “soul searching” in response to the “drift away from the people” observed by Hani was also shared by other members of the ANC leadership sufficiently for them to action a different form of democratic engagement between the “leadership and the membership” we do not know.

Conclusions: from national democracy to violent social implosion

Whatever the past, my own view for the future is that maintaining the current trajectory unchecked can potentially lead to violently catastrophic mass conflict in South Africa in ways that are occurring increasingly in other parts of the world. All the ingredients of comprehensively failed government institutions, increasing violent political factionalism in the ruling party over the patronage networks to access increasingly diminished public resources, further economic immiseration of the masses of people and deep social and political polarisation will serve as the likely backdrop. (Also see Von Holdt’s (2013) concept of SA as a violent democracy). Understanding how we got to this abysmal moment still matters and may help us to avert such a catastrophe. If 30 years of post-apartheid democracy has not yet realised the possibilities and hopes of a humane democratic socialist transformation, then the post-election moment must allow for honest reflection and action. Learning the lessons of the UDF would be reclaiming “memory as a weapon” in the inimitable phrase of the late, great poet Bra Don Mattera, a weapon that must be wielded carefully and purposefully to re-invest self-belief so that we can complete our journey of social emancipation. **NA93**

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ENDNOTES

- 1 'Action Kommandant' was a community mobilising slogan popularised by the late Ashley Kriel, an influential and much loved grassroots community leader, socialist and MK activist from the Cape Flats who was assassinated by the apartheid Security Police in 1987. <https://vimeo.com/154108468>
- 2 I am grateful to Prof Greg Ruiters for his insightful comments and feedback that informed the finalisation of this article.
- 3 See <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/interview-johnny-issel-key-udf-western-cape-leader-2003>
- 4 See <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/full-text-of-mbekis-state-of-nation-speech-314525>.
- 5 See <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00635.htm>

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