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UWUSA, Inkatvlgpa and COSATU

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Lessons  
from  
May Day

An alliance between COSATU and Inkatha in Natal Â\$ impossible. This is because of Inkatha's structure, and its hostility to working-class issues and politics. But, argues MIKE MORRIS, : . the May Day rallies show that COSATU and : \* Inkatha are the only two serious forces in 0!\â\200\234â\200\234&\â\200\230â\200\234! M{ } ( ) ' Natal's townships.

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] . : \ 4 9 For serious trade unionists in Natal thÂ¢ threat that Inkatha and UWUSA pose it one of the most pressing items on the agenda. If there was au initial attempt to dismiss the issue as irrelevant, thie 18 no longer the case in a number of important trade wunion and political circles.

There are three main reasons for this:

\* The Kings Park May Day rally demonstrated that Inkatha has mas: appeal TnitRiNa tail including serious working-class support;

\* the daily struggles Natal  
COSATU unions are engaged ir  
to hold their members {ir  
factories;

\* Inkatha members' violent  
onslaught on lleading UDF  
and COSATU members in the  
African townships, to the  
extent that the UDF  
organisational presence in  
most African townships in

Natal is now fairly minimal.

These events may have produced

a more sober perspective on

Running a trade union requires more Inkatha's ability to disrupt trade than political rhetoric union and alternative political organisation in Natal. But they have not necessarily been accompanied by a sound and critical analysis of what this development represents. There is enormous pressure to import the same tactics and strategies being used in other parts of the country and to deny

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the specific regional characteristics of

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Natal. This makes it extremely difficult for those organisations opposed to Inkatha to develop the appropriate tactics and strategy for Natal.

This denial of the regional specificity in Natal is an understandable, but nonetheless highly inadequate, reaction to capital and Inkatha's attempt to assert the 'uniqueness' of Natal and hence the necessity for what they have termed 'the KwaNatal option'.

Phillip Van Niekerk's article on Inkatha and May Day in Durban (WIP 42) is interesting precisely because he both acknowledges the regional specificity of Natal and the necessity of coming to terms with the peculiar political place that Inkatha occupies within this region. The main thrust of his argument - that May Day in Durban demonstrated serious support for Inkatha amongst Zulu workers - is undoubtedly correct. Between 50 000 and 70 000 people attended the Kings Park rally whilst COSATU's Curries Fountain rally only attracted 8 000-12 000. Van Niekerk, however, misses some of the important complexities of this phenomenon and hence is not able to suggest the appropriate strategy and tactics for COSATU in the region.

#### THE MAY DAY RALLIES

Van Niekerk argues that once COSATU entered Inkatha's terrain (ie the political arena) Inkatha had no choice but to take the battle to COSATU by entering into its own terrain (ie trade unionism). Hence the strategic decision to set up UWUSA in order to undermine COSATU in the factories and the consequent tactical choice of May Day to ostensibly launch UWUSA.

In fact the main point of the Kings Park rally was to embarrass COSATU politically by demonstrating Inkatha's support amongst the African urban and rural community. Based simply on the relative attendance numbers, this political objective was in the main achieved.

But was it strategically wise of Inkatha to launch UWUSA via May Day to

achieve this political aim? And if not, what are the implications for trade union and political struggles in this region? How can they gain from what I

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will suggest is a strategic error on Inkatha's part?

Notwithstanding the clear support Buthelezi demonstrated by the Kings Park rally he made a serious mistake both in the short and the long term. His cleverest move would have been to remain solely on the political terrain with which he was already familiar, and fairly well grounded in - Inkatha's ethnic appeals to 'Zulu nationality' and a conservative 'bourgeois democratic' solution. By moving into the trade union terrain he ironically decreased the potential short-term support he could have demonstrated in his Kings Park rally. And in the long term he also laid his organisation open to being shown to be incompetent in this new and unfamiliar terrain of factory-based struggles.

This difficult issue of Zulu cultural and ethnic identity which so strikingly pervades Natal, and is the reactionary basis of Buthelezi's power base in Inkatha, will not necessarily carry the same weight as factory-based struggles over working and service conditions.

Ironically Buthelezi could even have increased the crowd attending the Kings Park rally if it had not been linked to an alternative trade union organisation. Zulu workers are loyal to their Zulu ethnicity - an issue that is very poorly understood - but they are also loyal to the trade unions that have struggled so hard to alter conditions on the factory floor. Many workers who might well have attended a rally by virtue of their membership of Inkatha, or political agreement with Buthelezi, or ethnic identification, or tribal loyalty, were faced with having to support a rival union by going to Kings Park because the rally was publicised as the launch of UWUSA. As a result many of them chose rather to stay away precisely because they realised that, notwithstanding their political/ cultural/ethnic sentiments, attending also meant supporting a rival union in direct competition with their own union.

In the build-up to May Day one of the strongest arguments that organisers and shop stewards in COSATU were able to use in the clashes amongst union members in

their factories was that going to the Kings Park rally was not in fact attending an Inkatha rally but a rival union meeting. In a number of factories the workers agreed, in order to avoid further divisive conflict over the

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issue, that union members who wanted to demonstrate their support for Inkatha should rather just stay at home. In many cases this is what occurred, and union members attended neither May Day rally.

Some staunch Inkatha supporters suprisingly attended the Curries Fountain COSATU rally precisely because, as one worker who is also a member of the Kwa Mashu amabutho put it:

'The pamphlet calling us to Kings Park was signed by another union. We don't know that union. We know Inkatha and we know our own union, but we don't know this other union and we won't

support another union except our own'.

Whilst the Kings Park rally attracted a clear cross-section of the Zulu speaking-population in class and occupational terms, including a fairly large contingent of rural youth, Inkatha's appeal to the African urban youth is limited. Its recent attempt to call a 16 June rally around the issue of education, with Buthelezi as the main speaker, attracted, according to newspaper reports, only between 3 000 and 6 000.

On the other hand, the COSATU May Day rally at Curries Fountain was much more solidly working-class in its composition. This in itself is very interesting. The rally was a joint affair between COSATU and the UDF and the latter was formally given equal, and indeed in practice more than equal, status in the organisation of the event and in access to the platform. Yet, despite this, the crowd was overwhelmingly composed of organised workers from the COSATU unions.

So, under extremely favourable conditions, the UDF/Natal Indian Congress did not seem able to pull in a large number of additional, non-union supporters. The Durban Labour Monitoring Group estimated the composition of the crowd to be about 80% organised workers from COSATU unions whilst the majority of the remaining 20% were black students and unemployed youth.

The inability of the NIC to attract

Indian participants to the rally was very marked. This was all the more so since there were a large number of Indian workers who were not at work on that day, primarily due to the Garment Workers Union negotiating the day off through the regional industrial council.,

There are some obvious questions that spring to mind when faced with the logic of this numbers exercise: does taking account of the regional specificity of

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Natal mean that COSATU should do an about face and form a tactical alliance with Inkatha? Should Inkatha not be accorded the same status as other nationalist movements, and therefore should COSATU not be willing to work with Inkatha, given the fact that it has demonstrated its greater appeal in this region?

These are important questions that have to be seriously asked and answered. Otherwise one is at an organisational loss to provide workers who are Inkatha members with the answers to questions which, even if they are not openly expressing, they are certainly thinking about.

Answers also depend on the organisational and class perspective from which the questions are posed. A working-class organisation like COSATU, which is committed to working-class leadership, working-class democratic structures for decision-making, and has shown clear tendencies towards socialist solutions, will have a different perspective from a more nationalist organisation dominated by the petty bourgeoisie.

#### A TACTICAL ALLIANCE WITH INKATHA?

Without going into too much detail on Inkatha, there are critical characteristics of this organisation which make it extremely problematic for COSATU to attempt to strike up a long-term strategic alliance with it.

There is an important history in Natal between Inkatha and COSATU's predecessor (the Federation of South African Trade Unions - FOSATU) which has great bearing

on this issue. FOSATU was able to coexist uneasily with Inkatha whilst it

built up its trade union base in Natal. But this was increasingly breaking down as FOSATU attempted to take a more

political lead on community and national issues in the region.

For example, FOSATU made a number of attempts to gain Inkatha's co-operation over the consumer boycott in mid-1985 in order to avoid violence and ensure the maximum grassroots pressure on the state. These bore no fruit: Inkatha never demonstrated a public willingness to back the consumer boycott and mobilise its members to take any overt supportive action on the issue. Inkatha's attitude vacillated between



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,/i-\\201Ã@ssive inactivity and active hostility.  
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By the latter months of 1985 both FOSATU and Inkatha were heading for a showdown

of some sorts - the only ilssue was when and on whose tactical ground this would occur.

So, although it is debatable as to whether the COSATU leadership chose the right time, terrain, or style in allowing this conflict to surface, it is not very surprising that it broke out into the open so bitterly. For Inkatha displays characteristics that make it opposed to working-class practices. Although it is part and parcel of a capitalist society, it displays some of the characteristics of a pre-capitalist ethnic or nationalist movement where decision-mak g structures are based on ethnically-ascribed power relationms.

The most common form that this takes is the tribal power ascribed to representatives of the royal Zulu line (known as the 'mtwanas') who, by virtue of this status, are now granted enormous power and act as the repository of wisdom.

The source of this power does not just fall onto any member of the royal Zulu line but is contested by all those who accept it as the legitimate form of exercising power. This results in the adoption and spread of practices of personalised power in decision making which spreads far beyond rural tribal structures into all forms of social and political organisation. '

#### INKATHA'S POLITICAL STYLE

By all accounts this is a style that permeates Inkatha - whether one is talking about the top of the organisation where power is really concentrated or the smallest Inkatha leader in any particular community. It is what makes it possible for workers (both pro- and anti-Inkatha) to speak, with some material substance, of Buthelezi as synonymous with the organisation itself. It is what also

grants such enormous ideological legitimacy to local Inkatha leaders, smaller self-styled 'mtwanas', who rule in particular areas like latterday Chinese warlords.

Of course, the material basis of the power of the local Inkatha leadership is much more complex and derived from the varied functions they perform in the

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communities they preside over give and protection to.

But the important point is that the manner in which power is located within the structures of Inkatha is incompatible with the manner in which the larger COSATU unions attempt to distribute power. That is why the first task and potential conflict any serious trade unionist often faces in a newly-recruited Natal factory is tactfully to break the practice of nominating one of the 'mtwanas' in the factory as the spokesperson for the workers. Instead, this practice is replaced with democratically-elected shop steward committees, report backs, strict mandates etc.

This is not simply a matter of degrees of democracy, or the inadequate utilisation of democratic structures and procedures â\200\224 it is that these structures are of another character altogether. There seems to be no practice of direct democracy within Inkatha. This makes it very difficult for an organisation like COSATU to mesh with Inkatha in any mobilising campaign.

#### CONFLICT BETWEEN COSATU AND INKATHA

There are other more obvious, and perhaps even more important, reasons why COSATU could not easily fit into an alliance with Inkatha. The latter's hitherto unsympathetic attitude to working class-issues and working-class politics is shown by:

- \* Buthelezi's condemnation of the SASOL stayaway and his constant references to unions being acceptable if they stick to factory issues only;

- \* its easy recourse to violence to resolve differences of line rather than democratic argument (eg the National Union of Mineworkers' claim that UWUSA

broke up the NUM strike at Hlobane);

Â° its lack of structure of direct

democracy (the method of appointing  
UWUSA office bearers);

- \* its refusal thus far to mobilise its  
members behind a grassroots campaign  
(the Natal consumer boycott);

- \* its one-sided reliance on the public  
projected image of Buthelezi and  
diplomatic manoeuvres (the absence of  
any grassroots political style behind  
the KwaNatal indaba);

- \* its highly-sympathetic attitude to  
capitalism, strong links with monopoly

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Zulu workers - choosing between ethnic identity  
and union loyalty.

#### SOUND FACTORY ORGANISATION

The fundamental point is that struggles in the factories over economic issues have a dynamic of their own and take place differently from political/cultural issues. The latter may have disruptive effects on factory-based struggles. But they are unlikely to displace them as the principal issues around which workers unite and mobilise as long as there is sound organisation, and as long as union organisers and shop stewards spend a large amount of their time servicing these workers. UWUSA is therefore unlikely to be able to gain majority membership in, and hence take, many well organised factories from COSATU unions.

The most likely result in these factories is that a small but vociferous pocket of workers will go over to UWUSA and play a disruptive role similar to the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) in Natal a few years back. Organisers in COSATU unions dealing with the effects of such small opposition groupings will find themselves having to spend an inordinate amount of time overcoming splits and divisions,

capital and rabidly anti-socialist perspective.

These political practices are all highly problematic for COSATU. As long as they prevail within Inkatha it is extremely unlikely that any tactical alliances can be struck between the organisations.

Furthermore UWUSA, as a rival union whose sole reason for existence is to take away COSATU members, exacerbates the tension. For it makes anything other than active hostility the only appropriate response at the moment.

What then are the long-term implications of a severe conflict between COSATU and Inkatha, and particularly what effects will UWUSA have on COSATU organisation in the factories?

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repairing the effects of small mistakes, responding to vociferous criticism, and realistically countering highly inflated promises.

Badly organised, or unorganised factories where the benefits of belonging to a COSATU union are not readily apparent to the workers will more than likely go over to UWUSA since no alternative terrain of factory-based struggles will have been established. This has already happened to a number of COSATU unions in Natal.

Inkatha will then face the same problem that SAAWU in Natal faced in previous years. It is one thing recruiting unorganised or poorly-organised workers on the basis of highly-inflated promises, but quite another thing to deliver the goods once they have all joined. Inkatha will soon

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ad that running a trade union in even a partially successful manner requires far more than political rhetoric.

Notwithstanding the difference in Polical position, Inkatha will in this respect be in the same position as the

pall general unions affiliated to the uypF found themselves in over the past few years.

#### DEFINING THE BATTLEGROUND

A lot depends on how the COSATU unions handle the issue of Inkatha/UWUSA in their factories. It is a fundamental error, and grist to Buthelezi's mill, to fight Inkatha on its own terms. Derogatory references to Zulu ethnicity, to KwaZulu as just another bantustan, personalised attacks on Buthelezi, etc, are counterproductive. If COSATU unions forget what brought them their strength and shift the terrain of struggle away from the correct handling of bread and butter issues in the factories, and principles of union organisation, then they will undoubtedly lose. For then they will be engaging Inkatha on its strong polnts - ie what attracts ordinary Zulu workers to the organisation in the first place - rather than exploiting the strategic mistake Inkatha made in trying to take the struggle to COSATU on the terrain of union-based issues.

Inkatha and UWUSA are weakest on factory-based issues, on factory organisation, on bread and butter mobilisation, on factory and union-based democratic structures, and on dealing with contradictions in a democratic manner. This is borme out by the undemocratic topâ\200\224down manner in which UWUSA was formed, and by the fact that its office-bearers are mostly well-known black capitalists and personnel managers.

As long as UWUSA is unable to handle these issues in a manner familiar to well-organised COSATU members, it is unlikely to make major inroads into members' union affiliation, irrespective of political sympathies. But this depends on the COSATU unions constantly

focusing on these issues themselves, using democratic methods (as opposed to violent coercion) to win over workers attracted to UWUSA, and not allowing themselves to be diverted by the

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political red herrings that Buthelezi constantly throws at them.

#### METHODS OF STRUGGLE STRUGG NS

The question of method is important, There are basically two methods to defend a factory against UWUSA:

- \* violence against those who join UWUSA or try to organise for UWUSA, thereby coercing any with doubts to remain COSATU members, or

- \* democratically working through the points at issue in order to maintain the unity of the members in the factory.

The deceptively easiest method to use is coercion. In'the current circumstances it seems natural and fair since very often Inkatha members attempt to use coercion or the implied threat of coercion in order to make inroads or drive out opposition. Notwithstanding its seductive allure, coercion is in principle a bad method of keeping members. It advances the struggle for a clearer ideological line not one inch; and utilising the methods of ones opposition in this case merely reinforces reactionary practices, thereby undercutting the unions' case for democratic worker practices.

If, for example, COSATU unions try to physically force UWUSA members out of their factories, this gives all the moral justification in the world for Inkatha to pursue its practice of driving UDF and COSATU leaders out of the black townships they control. Coercion is also impractical when one's opponents are able either to legally counteract attempts at coercion or use violence more effectively than oneself.

Furthermore, as history should have taught us by now, once the practice of using violence to resolve essentially organisational problems is entrenched, it is a small step to use coercion to resolve other ideological differences. Invariably when this occurs, it is the left and the working-class organisations that are at the receiving end.

Although COSATU unions have not been sufficiently consistent in ensuring that the correct methods of fighting UWUSA have prevailed in their factories, there are a number of important successful counter-examples to coercion. Perhaps one of the most impressive is that of SA Tioxide which is one of the few COSATU



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factories in the Umbogintwinl area - an area well known for its recent violent crushings of any grouping outside of the ambit of Zulu ethnic politics. UWUSA has made no headway here despite the most favourable of circumstances.

This is primarily because the COSATU union's shop stewards, apart from concentrating on factory issues, have also held weekly general meetings at work to discuss critically and clarify their union's policies, COSATU's policies and Inkatha's policies. This practice has forced UWUSA members to argue their case rather than just making emotively ethnic appeals (calls for 'a Zulu union') and they have been unable to convince workers that UWUSA is a viable alternative.

#### DEBATING CLASS ISSUES

Politically, UWUSA/Inkatha can profitably be tackled on their overt and vociferous support for capitalism and free enterprise as the solution for the working class in this country. By coming out so strongly on this issue, and by handing over the leadership of UWUSA to black capitalists, Inkatha has itself raised the possibility for other forces to question and criticise its political line without impinging on the ethnic sensibilities of its members. This also raises the opportunity for other

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alternatives to the one put forward by .  
Inkatha. Å¥

Inkatha, whether it intended to or not, has opened up the possibility of a serious debate on class issues. The ground has been laid for other : organisational forces, particularly the COSATU unions, to take advantage of this opportunity and put forward alternative political lines, strategies and social : systems. t

In doing this, COSATU could have an important impact on township organisation in Natal. Of all the social forces in Natal's black townships, only two currently have a major i organisational presence: Inkatha, which

dominates; and COSATU, whose influence is spreading to other social groupings seeking an alternative to Inkatha.

COSATU could profitably take some initiative in the townships to forge a class alliance based on a socialist line, encouraging the adoption of working-class ideological and organisational principles. But this requires it to avoid a policy of ideologically and politically following behind other organisations.

Instead, if COSATU aggressively pursues an independent socialist line, the possibility exists for it to push popular consciousness and practices in Natal beyond the parameters set by the KwaNatal option, and even purely national-democratic solutions, towards an open discussion on the merits of socialism.