

## The Freedom Charter...

# Should it be adopted as the programme of the United Front?

WASP welcomes the proposal to debate the Freedom Charter as a possible programme to be adopted by the United Front. This is despite the fact that, as NUMSA itself acknowledges that the Freedom Charter is not a socialist programme. At NUMSA's historic December 2013 Special National Congress it was agreed to launch a United Front, form a Movement for Socialism and to explore the establishment of workers party. A programme is central to the building of a workers' party. To bring a party into being without this decisive question having been resolved, or at least the basis for it laid down clearly, such a party will not be able to fulfil the historic challenge facing the working class – the overthrow of capitalism and the socialist transformation of society.

For WASP the debate on the Freedom Charter presents the working class with the opportunity to develop a programme that would enjoy mass support and around which the struggles taking place in the three main theatres of class conflict – service delivery protests, student struggles against financial and academic exclusion and workplace struggles of the organised workers – can unite.

WASP opposes both the uncritical acceptance of the Freedom Charter as well as its outright rejection. We oppose especially attempts to impose it on the UF because such an approach is divisive and reinforces the mistaken but understandable suspicion that it is an attempt by NUMSA to import the political traditions of the ANC/SACP into a movement that intends to break not only with the Alliances' ideas, programme and organisational methods but also its culture of intolerance of dissent.

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The Congress of the People which adopted the Freedom Charter in Kliptown on 26th June 1955 provided the first opportunity for testing the balance of power in the relationship between the black working class and the petty bourgeois leadership of the ANC since the ANC had turned to the masses for support in the struggle against apartheid. Despite the common opposition to apartheid, the process of drafting the Charter revealed the conflicting aspirations of the different classes at the congress. ANC leader Ben Turok, who was responsible for drafting the economic clauses, confirms that the process was controversial with many delegates feeling that the Charter was not radical enough.

The vague contradictory nature of the formulations in the Charter reflected the success of the capitalist leadership in diluting the more radical socialist aspirations of the workers. From the standpoint of the worker delegates, the most important conquest was the nationalisation clause. In spite of the fact that the Charter does not call specifically for the abolition of capitalism, the sweeping nationalisation the Charter calls for at least poses the question of the abolition even if it does not answer it. The omission of the word socialism is not accidental, it reflects the dominance of the capitalist delegates at the Congress.

We accept that the Charter has serious deficiencies. In spite of

the fact that none of its most important demands, especially nationalisation, have been implemented, the ANC uses it to provide a cover for its betrayals. But we do not agree that this is an argument for discarding the document in its entirety. The fact is that, apart from the right to vote, not a single one of its most important demands have been met.

Nationalisation key  
The most important demand, nationalisation, was the first to be sacrificed. This was agreed to in the secret negotiations in the 1980s already. Codesa was merely the occasion to put pen to paper. But so complete was the ANC's capitulation to the pressure of imperialism that demands that are in fact achievable even on a capitalist basis, such as free education, free health care, an end to contract work and a 40-hour week, have been jettisoned.

Without the nationalisation clauses, the Freedom Charter is disembowelled. It means the ANC government has denied itself the means by which to fulfil all the Charter's other social demands. The ANC's declaration of 2015, the Charter's 60th anniversary, as the "Year of the Freedom Charter" is but the latest attempt to clothe the wolf of the ANC's neo-liberal capitalist policies in the sheep skin of the Charter.

How should the debate be approached?  
For those forces that arose independently of and also in opposition to the ANC but which nevertheless have been drawn to the "NUMSA moment", the



*The 1955 Congress of the People that adopted the Freedom Charter*

Charter's association with a corrupt, politically bankrupt and increasingly authoritarian ANC government, which together with its ally the SACP, is becoming more and more discredited, has understandably engendered hostility towards it. The ANC's betrayals are not attributable to the Charter, but the opposite, to its failure to implement a policy it still claims to subscribe to. The ANC abandoned altogether a document it had sworn by for nearly forty years. Its claim that it is the custodian of the Freedom Charter is sheer hypocritical posturing.

Those from outside the congress tradition have gravitated towards the "NUMSA moment" in the expectation that NUMA has embarked on a path that points to a complete break with the betrayals of the past two decades. This betrayal has entailed the subordination of the interests of the working class to those of the aspirant black capitalist class and their white capitalist masters behind them. It has been expressed in the increasingly rightward drift of an ANC government that, at best, now regards the working class more or less openly as mere political cannon fodder whose interests can just be contemptuously waived aside, and whose struggles must be suppressed with state violence at worst.

We believe the best way to overcome these differences is by subjecting the Freedom Charter to an overhaul aimed not only at addressing its deficiencies in relation to its demands but its false theoretical underpinnings. We propose a Socialist Freedom Charter. This means injecting the Charter with socialist content capable of addressing the social crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality, but also the residual unresolved matters related to the national question which has become re-inflamed. We propose a charter above all that shines a light on the path towards socialism.

However, neither its supporters nor its opponents have, in our view, drawn the correct conclusions about the Charter. Its supporters argue that it was not implemented because the ANC lacked the will to do so. Its critics argue that, especially given its preamble, but also its vagueness on a number of demands, the Charter had no revolutionary potential from the beginning; that the nationalisation clauses, by calling for the transfer of the wealth of the country to the "people", and not to the working class, could not have set the revolution on course towards genuine socialism.

A historical materialist analysis sheds a different, clearer light on the significance of all its clauses and how the evolution of the ANC leadership's position proceeded from regarding the Charter as fundamental to its programme for the "national democratic" transformation of the country, to abandoning it altogether.

Other shortcomings  
The Charter has obvious shortcomings. It does not provide for the right to strike. There are no demands for the eradication of the oppression of and discrimination against women, LGBTQ people, nor any on the environment, demands that have risen to the top of the working class agenda today. But these shortcomings can be easily remedied. This would make the Freedom Charter even more radical. In fact its demands are already so radical that it is impossible for all of them to be implemented within the framework of capitalism. The full implementation of the Charter requires the overthrow of capitalism and the socialist transformation of society.

The Charter's most serious shortcoming, however, lies not so much in these omissions, but in the fact that it is completely silent on the fact that its demands are incompatible with capitalism.

The Charter fails to spell out what measures would have to be taken to enable the working class to carry out the expropriation of the capitalist class and to create basis for its own rule. The Charter also does not explain that the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy is the only means by which a future government would be able to place the resources in its hands to enable it to fulfil all the other demands like free education and health and to substitute the anarchy of the free market with a democratically planned economy. Radical as the demand for the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy is, the Charter omits to qualify the nationalisation demand by linking it to workers control and management. There is no reason why these shortcomings cannot be addressed as part of the socialist overhaul of the Charter.

A Transitional Approach  
Despite widespread support for socialism, there is as yet not a sufficiently developed understanding amongst the guiding layers of the class of what socialism is and what the struggle for it entails. This is the reason that Trotsky, drawing on the experience of the Russian Revolution and the strategies and tactics of the Bolshevik Party, developed the concept of a Transitional Programme – one that is aimed at raising the prevailing level consciousness of the working class to the level required for the working class to grasp the necessity for the overthrow of capitalism and the socialist transformation of society; a programme that builds a bridge between these different levels of consciousness. WASP proposes that the aim of a socialist overhaul of the Freedom Charter must be to produce a transitional programme for the socialist revolution.