

# LETTERS

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## The SWP and the Anti-War Movement

BOB, DO you even bother to read your own sectarian crap. ONE MILLION on the streets and “The sole concern of the SWP, as with all far left sects, is to increase its own size and influence” [“Cynicism and the SWP”, *What Next?* No.25]. This is a truly incredible piece of sectarian drivel, even by Spart standards. Don’t send me your rotten little sectarian rag sheet again and try pulling your head out of your bum and helping the anti-war movement instead of drooling.

**Kevin Murphy**

**The editor replies:** Thanks for that, Kevin. Even when I disagree with someone, I can always admire their ability to present a reasoned argument.

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## Dulcie September

I AM an alumna of the University of Western Cape where I obtained my doctorate in History on J.T. Gumede, 1867-1946.

Currently I am doing research into the life of Dulcie September, ANC representative assassinated in Paris, France on 29 March 1988. I appeal to comrades and readers who have any memories and photographs of the late Dulcie to kindly contact me on my e-mail address: vandiemeljohn@hotmail.com

**Raymond van Diemel**

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## More on the Unity Movement

THIS IS just a short note on Joe Rassool’s book, *District Six: Lest We Forget*, the review by Norman Traub and Rassool’s reply [*What Next?* Nos.18 and 20]. The history of the Non-European Unity Movement is important. It undeniably contributed to the development of a revolutionary left movement in South Africa and our collective debt to the NEUM is well acknowledged, even by Mandela and Mbeki (who, by the way, was briefly a member prior to his exile, apparently). Most of the post-Sharpeville generation who turned to

radical politics and Marxism encountered the Unity Movement in some form or another, and its leanings towards Marxism assisted in the emergence of a new generation of Marxists. However, what those who participated in this movement misrepresent is its demise and total irrelevance since at least the late 1970s.

The NEUM had its roots in the early Trotskyist movement in South Africa, emerging from initial groups in the Cape in the 1930s like the Lenin Club, the Fourth International Organisation of SA and the Workers Party of SA – one of which corresponded with Trotsky, resulting in his famous letter to South African comrades [“On the South African Theses”, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934-35*, pp.248-55]. However, it’s important to note that the main figures like Tabata and Gool, while Trotskyist, went on to form the NEUM and its predecessors as out-and-out nationalist organisations. From its very inception the Unity Movement broke with revolutionary Marxism, and kept its Trotskyist views very much out of sight. It was nothing more nor less than a radical petty bourgeois nationalist movement and its much debated 10-point programme differed very little from the popular, and in some senses more radical, Freedom Charter of the ANC and the Congress Movement.

The attempt to radicalise the NEUM tradition has been going on for at least 40 years, with its various off-shoots adopting bizarre labels such as “Marxist-Leninist” or “socialist” without in any way breaking with petty bourgeois nationalism, only absorbing variants of Stalinism into its existing ideological framework, which the ANC could do through the prism of the official CP (SACP).

While the assertion about the Stalinist nature of the NEUM’s Marxism may seem unfounded, any serious reflection on the land question exposes them as truly unacquainted with the basics of revolutionary Marxism. Even today, when groups emerge from the corpse of the NEUM organisations they cling to Lenin’s old formulation of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry! They get themselves into a real muddle over this question because they believe, against all empirical and political evidence, in the existence of a black peasantry of equal weight with the black working class. The origins of this confusion stem from the early political breaks between Trotskyists in SA on the land

question, which did at the time exist as a serious social reality. They have continued to be confused about it ever since and try to radicalise this nonsense by borrowing quite unhelpfully from the canon of Lenin, which leads them to positions and formulations not a stone's throw away from Stalinist politics.

The claim of Rassool to have broken with the Unity Movement on the basis of its position on the conflict in the former Yugoslav republics perhaps best illustrates how completely irrelevant this movement became to the South African working class during its most radical and class conscious period of struggle from the Durban strikes in 1973 right up to the unbannings of 1990. The entire NEUM tradition had become an ossified circle of petty bourgeois, mostly "coloured" and mostly teachers. Its lingering link to reality was the South African Council on Sport, which campaigned against apartheid-sponsored sport and for non-racial sport. Even this was a very limited contribution to mass struggle and reflected the overall character of the NEUM. It is important to note that during the period of most intense struggle these people stood on the side-lines, very often condemning the mass movement for its "excesses". In real historical terms they stood against the masses, gripped by the sickness of old men attempting to dictate terms to the new movement of the class from the reified positions in their armchairs. It's a bloody good thing the working class and its activists paid no attention to them!

So while there is much to learn from the NEUM's history, as someone who encountered the real character of this movement as anti-proletarian and anti-mass struggle I would argue that all its wisdom and experience is an example of how *not* to build a revolutionary movement, a history lesson in the negative if you will. And for the record I think these people must account for how they become so thoroughly dislodged from the mass movement because, while the Unity Movement suffered all these little internal schisms, it was nevertheless at one point a mass movement, the premier organisation of the struggle of the black masses, but it ended as nothing but a footnote.

The attempts to make the ANC and SACP villains, which in general litter the NEUM's historiography, don't explain anything other than that the ANC were better nationalists than they. The events of the '30s and '40s as told by the NEUM were impressive, but let's acknowledge that the black working class was then only taking shape and by the time the mighty proletarian army arose as a fighting force for socialism and democracy this movement had departed from the scene. That really is the sad thing about the NEUM tradition – it could and should have been the first mass-based Trotskyist movement in SA but rather chose the sorry path of nationalism at the very point when the black working class was beginning to emerge as a serious independent force.

**Glenn Farred**

## Correspondence Welcomed

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