

THE QUESTION OF AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS

Supplement to Report by Edgar Lockwood on his Trip to the Frontline States, London and Geneva, October 3 - November 10, 1978.

The question of recognition of African trade unionism in South Africa has become a topic of growing interest and debate in the United States and Europe. The following notes are intended to sketch out what I learned about the subject from a number of sources who hold differing views.

While I was in Gaborone on October 21st and 22nd, I learned that the African American Labor Center was sponsoring a 4-day meeting of 50 African trade unionists from South Africa and other African countries at the Holiday Inn there. According to Clagott Taylor, the South Africa desk officer at State, the meeting was inconclusive. Some favor an overall integrated trade union federation; others favor a federation of African unions alone. One labor union source told me that AALC had screened out all SACTU people. I was told that AALC is carrying on trade-union training programs in Botswana and Rhodesia.

African National Congress - South Africa, London Office.

Cap Zungu, the ANC Representative in London, believes that the reason for the current push is that the so-called "moderate" trade unionists, who are very much part of the system in South Africa, such as Grobelaar, see trade unionism as an alternative to political organizing. It's what ANC refers to as "economism". From the perspective of ANC, the primary task must be to erode the system away rather than to make it work better. ANC does not favor delegation visits by American trade unionists on the ground that such visits will help the government to establish its credibility. The government will only allow certain people to visit and then they will only allow certain people to be seen. The delegation will see only the moderates; they will not be allowed to speak to those who are under detention or in jail for their views.

Mike Terry, Anti-Apartheid Movement, London.

This is a difficult and sensitive issue. On the one side, recognition of African trade unions is clearly part of the whole reform-but-not-revolution caste of thought including the code-of-conduct "syndrome." What is actually being talked about is company-wide unions and not industry-wide unions. It should be clear that the government simply will not allow them to deliver any real clout.

On the other hand, SACTU members are in these unions, even those that are under the grip of TUCSA, and they need support.

In practical terms, when dealing with British rank and file trade unionists, it is a lot easier to start with issues that he or she knows about, such as union recognition and increases in wages, rather than to portray the evils of apartheid as a system and argue for isolation and withdrawal.

Any delegation is bound to go with official government sanctions and the ground rules are bound to be strict. The government will see to it that the delegation doesn't get to meet militant trade unionists but moderates. It will be impossible to see people it is important to see.

John Gaetswe, General Secretary, SACTU, London.

I had a chance to talk to John Gaetswe briefly in London. He had actually just returned from a trip to the United States and said that he had been introduced to Doug Fraser at a meeting in Memphis but had not had a chance to talk fully. He had been impressed by his reception on the West Coast.

He said that the question of recognition of trade unions had come up in the 1950s and 1960s as a primary demand. It was later that the demand for a withdrawal of all foreign investments became important. While the recognition of African trade unions is a very important demand, it is also important to keep it in the context of the demand for dismantling of apartheid and for disinvestment.

He emphasized that if American unions had specific questions, it would be useful to hear directly about them and he could give a more complete answer outlining SACTU's views.

Ray Simons (ne Alexander), SACTU, Lusaka.

Mrs. Simons is a very cordial white woman of about 65, who has been in exile from South Africa and living in Zambia since 1965 or so. Her husband, John Simons, is or has been a professor at the University of Zambia. She was banned by the South African government in the early 1960's but in 1965 was given an exit visa which permitted her and her husband to emigrate to Zambia.

The issue of African trade unionism seems now to have been seized upon by foreigners as a "solution" to the South African problem. But it needs to be seen in its political context. The wholesale uprooting of the squatters' settlement in Capetown, a settlement in which all but 6% of the males are actually workers in employment, illustrates that the fundamental government policy of apartheid is being ruthlessly carried out. By 1980s the Bantustans will be independent, making Africans foreigners in South Africa. The question of African trade unions has to be seen against this backdrop.

She illustrated what has been happening by telling me the story of a woman she has known, a Xhosa who has lived on the Cape since 1919. Her son was captured in the disastrous ANC/ZAPU raid on Rhodesia in 1966. Since then, he has been in prison on Robben Island. Every month or so, she has been visiting him. Now since the "independence" of the Transkei, she is required to obtain papers from the Transkei "government" each time she wants to see her son, which she refuses to do. She is 77 years old and has lived in South Africa all these years.

The Afrikaner Nationalist Party has no intention of allowing genuine trade unionism to flourish. In fact, they intend to water down the rights of white trade unionists by emphasizing the greater use of liaison committees, arbitration and other ways of incorporating workers into the system through devices which can be bureaucratically controlled. In 1948 when the Nationalists came to power, they set up a National Labor Board, not along the lines of the NLRB in the U.S., but to control the labor movement. The government regards the trade union movement as a foreign institution.

She told me a little of her own history. In 1937 she helped to organize the Food and Canning workers along the lines of the CIO in the United States. She said she had been in touch with a man named Henderson who was then a Secretary of the CIO. She later lost touch with him during the McCarthy period, but he had been a source of inspiration to her.

In 1947 she had organized an integrated registered trade union in the food industry of which the secretary was an African. But when the Nationalists came to power "employees" was a term defined in such a way as to eliminate Africans from registered unions. The union was forced to segregate. A separate, unregistered African Canning Union was formed. "We were forced to do it," she said. At that time, Margaret Bourke White of LIFE came to take photos. They were published (Ray thinks) in the August 1948 issue of LIFE, but she never saw it since the issue was banned in South Africa.

American firms have not been helpful. They have been dragging their feet. Basically they only want to recognize unions if they are unique to the company. She referred to a book by a man named Shapiro entitled Unions of Your Own Choosing for background.

As the Nationalist Party government tightened up on apartheid, the forms of integrated trade union organization broke down. The Trades and Labor Council which had embraced all closed down. The Confederation of South African Trade Unions formed itself on racial lines. The Trade Union Council of South Africa, TUCSA, embraced only those unions which were registered and it excluded from membership African trade unions although it established with them "parallel" relations in which TUCSA acted as a sort of parent organization. The African and other trade unions that objected to this form of race distinction and domination formed SACTU, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, which affiliated itself with the Congress Alliance in which the African National Congress was the key organization.

In 1954, TUCSA was not accepted at the ILO because the international unions questioned the racism inherent in such a constitution. TUCSA then sponsored and formed the Federation of Free African Trade Unions and provided it with organizing funds. Later on, FOFATU was closed down.

Basically, the African trade unionists don't trust TUCSA, because it is

dominated by the Coloured trade unions which constitute two-thirds of the membership. The African trade unions which are still linked to TUCSA in parallel comprise only 25,000 African workers, of whom 23,000 are in Lucy Mbuvelo's garment workers' union. But Mrs. Simons estimates that there are some 200,000 to 250,000 workers in independent African unions which are unregistered. (This is much higher than any figures reported elsewhere.)

This phenomenon has led to the proposed formation of a federation of African trade unions which will in fact be open to all workers. Some coloured workers have tried to discourage this federation. It was scheduled to be formed in the Durban area on or about October 21st. Some of the people involved are from the GM and Ford plants. As a whole, they do not accept TUCSA leadership. Grobelaar is considered very reactionary.

She would very much like to be informed of any AALC developments and also any trade unionist visitors, between USA and South Africa.

Edward Dilinga, National Executive, African National Congress-South Africa
Raymond Mok ena, ANC staff, in Lusaka.

They stressed the fact that American corporations are collaborating with the system in South Africa, mentioning the documentation of ACOA on GM. Trade unionists in America should be pressed on the issue of what the corporations define as "self-defense". What about the corporation support in "self-defense" of police who attack strikers?

As long as investments increase, America is bound to try to defend those interests irrespective of the brutality of the system. The U.S. will never put significant pressure on South Africa because in actual fact South Africa is protecting those corporate interests.

The recognition of African trade unions is something the ANC cannot go against. On the other hand, what is behind it? ANC sees it as part of the EEC and Sullivan Code approach, an attempt to defuse a volatile situation. If the result is the building of an organization as an alternative to the liberation movements, it waters down and dilutes the strength of the struggle.

A slogan like "Equal pay for equal work" affects only certain levels of work. You don't find whites in the lower levels, the laborer levels. It really affects only those in the skilled and managerial levels. These may in fact be articulate people but they are not the bulk of the workers and it is the bulk of the workers who really matter.

There is therefore a grave concern that what is being built is a middle class, a labor aristocracy, that will act as a buffer to neutralize the strength of the working class movement.

The central issue is that political power must change. The ruling government is in fact responsible to its own electorate, which includes the white working class. The South African employee who is white is in fact being subsidized in what he earns by the exploitation of the South African Africans, who work mostly in the lower paid levels and jobs.

Trade unionists in the United States must be prepared to argue that investments in the U.S. would in fact create more jobs for them than investments in South Africa.

Eli Weinberg, Administrative Secretary of SACTU, Dar es Salaam.

Weinberg and his wife came out of South Africa only in the last two years. Before that they had been living under virtual house arrest in Johannesburg. Weinberg was in prison for trade union activities in the 1960s. He had been later forced to take up professional photography as a way of earning a living, although he is a trade union organizer by training and experience. Their daughter is still living in their house in Johannesburg, virtually in a state of siege because of attacks from vandals.

In discussing the question of recognition of African trade unions, Weinberg said that he did not recommend that African unions become registered under the Industrial Conciliation Act, which has many crippling requirements. For example, the registrar can lay down what is to be in the constitution of a registered union. The process of electing officers is specified. There can be rules on how one can invest members' funds and vetoes put in the hands of the government. A registered union will be prohibited from political activity.

On the other hand, there is nothing to prevent employers being pressed to recognize independent, unregistered African unions notwithstanding

employer resistance and disapproval by the government, harrassment and prolonged questioning by the security branch and the police.

Weinberg emphasized the necessity to use whatever means exist to carry on the struggle and not to be purist about it. For this reason, SACTU has encouraged people to stand for election to works committees, which are elected as distinguished from liaison committees which are appointed. For a long time, workers regarded works committees as a substitute for trade unions. In a number of cases, trade unionists have captured works committees and used them as platforms.

In some cases, such as Heinemann's where there was a disastrous strike in 1974 in which workers were defeated, beaten and discharged, the former trade union which was registered has in fact become de-registered in hope of incorporating the full labor force.

At Smith and Nephew, the company abrogated its agreement with the registered union. Its work force is now overwhelmingly African. It is clearly in the interests of white workers to find a better relationship with the growing African trade union movement.

At the end of World War II, the engineering industry in South Africa was 50/50 black and white. Today it is 80% black and 20% white. Blacks are now machine operators. What had been skilled and semi-skilled jobs filled by artisans have been broken down into component operations. The majority of whites are now not in artisan jobs. Some are now in executive positions but the rest are machine operators. The effect is that the white registered unions are no longer representing the dominant labor force in the industry. The white unions are worried. Will works committees and liaison committee schemes be extended to white unions?

Thirty years ago, the Nationalist Party took the position that they did not need trade unions at all. Their first point of attack was African trade unions. But ILO had laid down the principle that a government that puts a ban on any form of trade unions cannot be part of ILO. Because white trade unionists had the vote, the government was forced to continue to recognize them. But now in view of their weakened position, the government is trying to emasculate them by putting them further under administrative control of the executive branch.

Andrew Kailembo, of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unionists was recently visiting South Africa and interviewed a number of African trade unionists and offered them money. While some of them accepted the money, others said, "Put it through SACTU," which was a brave thing to say because SACTU officials are either in jail or in exile and the institution itself lives a semi-clandestine existence inside the country.

ANC's position is that it is the coming government of South Africa, whether that be in five years or twenty years. They therefore ask that money not be channeled in such a way as to bolster the regime, giving it recognition. In addition, people who openly accept money from foreign sources in the end run into trouble. NUSAS and the Christian Institute are examples. SACTU does have ways and means of channeling money into support work.

SACTU emphasizes the necessity of solidarity on moral grounds, even if this means sacrificing some of the workers' self-interests as might be the case in Germany where it has been stressed that South Africa is a good customer for Volkswagens. Work stoppages in protest of loading and unloading South Africa goods are good. There can be financial assistance to South African refugees through such projects as the building of a school at Morogoro.

SACTU has debated the wisdom of backing the formation of an integrated federation of all workers and, on balance, has decided that it is a good thing and a plan in which people should participate. "We have not excluded public and legal levels of activity." On the other hand, they are clearly worried by external influence such as those of the African American Labor Center and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. ANC and SACTU believe that it is important to work to overcome the split in the working class. In a future South Africa white and black will have to live together so it is important to work on this question now.

Mr. Reddy, the chief of the ANC mission in Dar es Salaam, was present during part of this session and was supportive of Weinberg's position. He is African; Mr. Weinberg is white.

Mogale Mokgoatsane, Pan Africanist Congress, Administrative Secretary, Dar es Salaam.

Trade unionism as such is never enough. The government could in fact continue to operate the apartheid system even if African trade unions were recognized on a much broader scale than they are today.

The major problem in terms of trade union work is the lack of organizational skills. PAC, unlike ANC, does not have a trade union affiliate. PAC does have and would use its influence in the autonomous trade union movement.

Because of the security aspect, PAC would prefer to see aid channeled through them. The assistance of American trade unions would be most welcome.

White unions have invariably developed a paternalistic relationship with black unions. Both the Communist Party and the Liberal Party support the idea of integrated unions. PAC does not. They are fearful that any attempt at a grand national federation will be broken up when the South African government cracks down. This was the experience of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union which flourished from 1919 to 1932 and was at one time very strong. "The liberals came in and it broke up." The ICFTU has been in communication with PAC. There is some possibility of working through the good offices of the ILO to assist African trade unions.

Collin Gonze, International Metalworkers Federation, Geneva.

Herman Rebhan, the head of the Geneva IMF office, and Werner Thurnesson (sp?), the man charged with African questions and a German trade unionist, were currently in Mauritius for a conference with IMF affiliates in Africa, including South African unions.

In South Africa the IMF has created a "council" in order to bring together the white, Coloured and African workers. It cannot call strikes and is essentially a weak co-ordinating body.

Because the African trade unions are small and weak, they come under the protection of the Coloured trade union, which is the dominant factor in the auto industry. Money for training has come from the Urban Training Fund, the ultimate source of which Collin does not know.

He sees value in a UAW delegation. The South African government, however, will unquestionably screen out from the delegation persons who might take a strong pro-boycott position. For example, the chief UAW bargainer at Chrysler is a black American who might be forced to take a pro-boycott position because of rank and file pressure from blacks. The person who authorized a visa for such a person would be in trouble with the government if on return to the States a boycott position were taken by him or by part of the delegation.

There is a strike now going on at the Union Carbide EverReady battery division over trade union recognition. This is an issue which cuts across racial lines because the white union feels that it is being squeezed out. One purpose of the Wiehahn Commission, according to Collin, is to make sure that white unions are not undermined by blacks. Employers are more and more using blacks to take jobs formerly done by whites and which are now fragmented down into specialized operations.

Jean Pierre Laviec and Jane (June?) Landau (an American), Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF), Geneva.

The union is a federation of trade unionists in the food industry all over the capitalist world.

This October 23-28th the federation targetted Unilever for a work stoppage campaign in support of an African food union in South Africa.

They selected Unilever because it was regarded as "not too tough" a company. Also, the African Food and Allied Workers' union there constitutes most of the work force at Unilever. There are in all some 5,000 in the African affiliate of IUF of which 3,000 are at Unilever. There have been strikes and work stoppages in Scandanavia, Holland and Britain against Unilever but so far management has refused to deal with the issue at all.

IUF does not support boycotts but rather advocates bolstering their affiliates in South Africa, a position similar to IMF. They were very interested in the Export-Import Bank bill and asked for a copy.

I note that the President of the IUF is a Scandanavian, Signard Nystrom. Craig Williamson of IUEF (International University Exchange Fund), told me that their sources, i.e. mostly Scanadavian countries, had put money into union newspapers and into training of trade unionists up until two years ago. Now the same funding sources are putting their money through trade unions themselves.

Neville Rubin, ILO, Geneva.

SACTU is not allowed to be represented at ILO meetings because they do not fall in any of the categories which are allowed to be represented. They could come as part of an ANC delegation which could be granted observer status. ILO cannot have direct relations with South African trade unions because of previous decisions on the question of South African racist laws in respect to trade unions.

Neville says that he personally thinks it is helpful for IUF and IMF and others to be taking initiatives to strengthen the trade unions, and to support their demands for recognition. SACTU's demand for what Rubin describes as a negative response is in the end not helpful. The unions exist and they should be strengthened. Rubin claimed that SACTU itself does not really exist in South Africa although it leads a sort of shadowy existence. It is really an organisation only in exile. Individuals may remain loyal to it inside but it has no organizational life, its leaders being in prison, in detention or under ban.

He very much wants information about our Eximbank victory to put in his newsletter.

Note on the Wiehahn Commission:

Julian Sturgeon, an independent journalist for the Southern African News Agency in Botswana, says that he has seen the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations; That only Africans with Section 10 rights will in effect be allowed to be members of registered African trade unions; contract laborers would be excluded. This would mean that as the bantustans get independence, the number of African trade unionists would be reduced in parallel sequence. Officials of African trade unions would be obliged to take courses at the University of South Africa and would then be certified by the Government after security and other checks. It is thus apparent that no politically-oriented persons will be permitted into leadership posts.