

**THE APPROACH OF THE  
UNITY MOVEMENT  
TO TRADE UNIONS  
BY  
DR G.H. GOOL**

Reproduced by:  
APDUSA VIEWS  
P.O.BOX 8888  
CUMBERWOOD 3235  
e-mail: [Malentro@telkomsa.net](mailto:Malentro@telkomsa.net)

## **Introduction:**

Throughout Conference<sup>1</sup> the one note that was struck time and again was the insistence upon the need to correlate every one of our particular problems to the general problem of the lack of political rights. The Trade Union question is an important one and it is essential for us to approach it in the correct manner. For without a correct understanding of our many tasks, all our work would be futile, purposeless and ineffective. It is therefore necessary to see the Trade Union movement as a part of our whole struggle, and thus gain a correct perspective so that our understanding of it will determine our activities in relation to it.

The UNITY MOVEMENT approaches TRADE UNIONISM as it approaches all other problems, from a point of view at once fundamental and wide. There is nothing narrow or sectional in its approach, and this is what distinguishes it from all liberal and pseudo-left policies. The Non-European Unity Movement is a broad, all-embracing movement which concerns itself with the problems of the worker in the town and country, with the professional, with the businessman, and with the peasant. It has been established with the specific purpose of fighting National Oppression common to all Non-European groups; to Africans, Coloured and Indians. It bases its struggle for liberation on the recognition of the fact that all our disabilities flow from a lack of political rights. Because of our political bankruptcy, various laws have been passed against all of us on the arbitrary ground of Colour and Race and these vicious laws are responsible for the poverty and degradation of our people.

It is essential for us, therefore, to see the Trade Union question as one facet of the many-sided National Liberatory Movement which seeks to destroy oppression and remove all the disabilities, all the discriminations, all the restrictions suffered by the Non-European peoples.

The Non-European worker, whether on the mines, in the factories or on the land, carries a double load. He is oppressed first and foremost because he belongs to one of the oppressed groups of South Africa (African, Coloured or Indian) and secondly, because he is a worker. A failure to appreciate this simple and yet basic fact is to be blind to the real position of the Non-European worker in our struggle for full citizenship.

The absence of a strong and fully representative delegation from the Trade Union Movement as a whole confirms the fact that the latter still carries the blinkers of "pure" Trade Unionism - which is another name for sectarianism. Already it has been pointed out at this Conference that we must take pick and shovel to demolish the artificial walls of segregation that divide the various oppressed groups of South Africa. We have spoken at length on how our various groups are afflicted with the mortal cancer of segregation.

We find that this dreaded disease has not escaped the Trade Union Movement. And this is not accidental because the Trade Union Movement is an inseparable part of the movement for National Liberation.

---

<sup>1</sup> This Conference refers to the Fourth Unity Conference held in December 1945

However, it is one thing to recognise racial oppression, but it is another thing fighting it and striking at the core of the economic starvation which is part of it. There are some individuals who have actually invented a means of "measuring" poverty, who draw imaginary "poverty datum lines", who go in for extensive and expensive - social surveys and turn out impressive volumes of statistics. But while careers lie open to what are called social scientists, the immeasurable cancer of oppression with its many branches: poverty, starvation, disease and crime spreads steadily and uninterruptedly through the body of the Non-European peoples. We need no artificial measuring rod to tell us how much we are oppressed; we need no fancy "poverty datum lines" to tell us all the things we haven't got. But neither do we need an artificial measuring rod to measure what we want what we demand: FULL DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS, EQUALITY OF POLITICAL AND CIVIL RIGHTS, as embodied in the Ten Point Programme.

## **EARLY TRADE UNIONISM IN EUROPE**

Before looking into the Trade Union Movement in this country, let us see how it arose in England, the first industrial country. In the early period of industrialisation in England, workers had long and arduous hours of work under the most appalling conditions.

To protect themselves from brutal exploitation at the hands of their capitalist masters, they formed associations of workers now known as Trade Unions. In this way they claimed the right of every man and woman for a living wage, to earn enough to buy nourishing food, to live in decent homes, to educate and clothe their children. Now it was the very conditions of life under which the English worker was forced to live and labour the long hours, the pittance called wages, the grinding poverty, the slums and the disease, the child and woman labour, the heavy infant and maternal death roll - all these had brought them face to face with the need, the absolute necessity to take steps to defend themselves. It was the simple, primitive instinct for self-preservation. So they formed their first Trade Unions. And at this stage they confined themselves exclusively to the economic field, to the question of hours of work, wages, etc. The strike was the only weapon that could force concessions from the master-class. But the fundamental question of politics was left to the two parties of the ruling class, the Tories and the Whigs, or as we know them, to the Conservatives and the Liberals. And even after a successful struggle was found for the franchise, the Trade Unions still persisted in confining themselves to the purely Trade Union field.

More and more, this conservative attitude in the Trade Unions changed. It needed the first World War to shake the conservative working-class of England and compel it to take up a political line. This political tendency within the Trade Union movement had brought into being the Labour Party.

That is why we see the Trade Union movements in Britain interlocked with the Labour Party - the latter being dependent for its position on the Trade Union Movement. This political tendency had become more marked with the end of the Second World War, when we witnessed the Labour Party in England as the ruling party. In France the present major political parties, the Communists and the Socialists and even the so-called

Bourgeois Progressive Catholic Party, are dependent upon the Trade Unions for its support.

It is not our task to go into the policies and programmes of these parties. What is important to us in South Africa is to note the political tendency that has developed within the conservative European Trade Union Movement in these major imperialist countries. And this political necessity was again the result of bitter lessons that the working-class had to learn - because it had narrowed and restricted its activities to "pure" Trade Unionism. There is a slogan of that period which clearly reflects the purely economic approach to the Trade Union question!

"A fair day's wage for a fair day's work". It took the working-class many years, years of poverty and suffering, years of economic crisis and its inevitable unemployment, years of war and the experience of fascism, before it outgrew this deceptive slogan, before it realised the necessity to base every struggle on the political struggle.

#### AFRICAN WORKER

Let us return to the South African scene. It was the same elemental instinct for self-preservation that forced the African workers to come together and form Trade Unions. And this, despite the fact that African Trade Unions are illegal and under the Industrial Conciliation Act the African worker is not recognised as an employee. Note that the Law dictates the illegality of the Trade Unions. In other words, the African worker is deprived of the most elementary right protection against economic exploitation because of his lack of political rights. To-day the Government can outlaw all these African Trade Unions precisely because they are the State, they are the executive of the ruling class and they have the law working for them against the African workers. As an example we may mention a Judge's ruling against the Sweet Workers Union ("Cape Argus", 10th December 1945) which declared that a Union cannot be registered if Africans become members of it. Here was an excellent opportunity for those political lawyers, Messrs D. Molteno and H. Snitcher, who took up the case, to bring home to the people their complete lack of political rights, and to stress the political root of the whole Trade Union question. But instead of seizing this opportunity they evaded the whole issue by reducing the case to a "test of validity". Such an approach to the Trade Union question by these so-called politicians merely confuses the oppressed workers and blinds them to the real issue.

The illegal status of the African Trade Unions at once exposes the political status of the African worker - which is that of a political outcast without rights of any kind. And it is not only the worker, it is the whole African race that is outcast, that has no political rights, no say in the laws of their country, and are therefore at the mercy of every form of oppression and exploitation.

How immediate is the impact between the Trade Union question and the political bankruptcy<sup>2</sup> of the African!

The Trade Union is no sooner formed than it comes up against the question of illegality. In this light, the absence of the leaders of the African Trade Unions from this Non-European Unity Conference is an indication of the lack of political vision and political understanding on this most vital and fundamental question. I would even go further and say that their

---

<sup>2</sup> The term "political bankruptcy" is not used in a disparaging sense as meaning devoid of any creative approach to the political struggle. It refers to the absence or denial of any political rights whatsoever to the African people.

absence indicated an attitude of inferiority and a complete lack of independence. It is the old road of passivity and of the acceptance of the segregation outlook of the ruling class, which so well suits the plans of the ruling class for the enslavement of all Non-Europeans. But the Non-European Unity Movement points the way to the new road, to the rejection of the policy of trusteeship and segregation, to the fight for our rights as citizens of this country and to the Unity of all Non-Europeans as the first step in our struggle for liberation.

## **RECENT COLOUR-BAR LEGISLATION AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT**

All these laws have one aim - to break the unity of the workers in the Trade Unions. Let us take the matter of the Coloured Advisory Council. It was hoped that the Coloured people would accept this as a boon. Also that the Coloured workers now organised with the white workers in Trade Unions would be weaned away from these Trade Unions and come under the wing of the Coloured Advisory Council, as a preliminary to the formation of Coloured Company Unions. If the Coloured Advisory Council had worked, these Coloured Trade Unions would have threatened organised labour in the Cape and would have reduced the standard of life not only of the Coloured workers, but also of the White workers; because there would have been no joint action on the part of the Coloured and White workers against their common enemy, the employing class.

## **THE PASS LAWS IN THE CAPE**

Let us take again the question of the Pass Laws. The real purpose is the creation of labour depots - or urban bottlenecks which will supply the needs of the factory owners in the town. This cheap labour force will be a perpetual threat to organised labour in the Cape and the recent ruling mentioned with regard to the Sweet Workers Union is merely a cunning device to debar the Africans from joining the Unions, and to prevent the workers as a whole, White, Coloured and African, to see their identity of interests. It would be suicidal for the for the workers to allow division to enter their ranks still further and be by this capitalist trick.

Many of us know that when the Trade Unions in the Cape were first organised, by the European workers who came from overseas, all workers were allowed admission. The European workers came to South Africa with a militant Trade Union tradition and understood clearly the imperative need for unity of all workers.

It was only later that discriminatory laws were introduced in the economic sphere, specifically directed against the Non-European worker; because the ruling class could not see a United Trade Union Movement developing undisturbed, and it was necessary to use the State machinery to effect division within their ranks. Division having been created among the workers on the grounds of Race and Colour, we find a White Labour Bureaucracy growing up within the Trade Union Movement in South Africa and taking over the Herrenvolk ideas of the White master race. No attempt was ever made by this White labour bureaucracy to fight the pernicious Industrial Colour Bar Laws.

In the A.P.O. newspaper, 1919, we read how the late Dr Abdurahman came out openly against these white labour bureaucrats and the lip-service they were paying to unity. He was fully aware of their real function within the

Trade Union Movement and advocated the formation of separate Coloured Trade Unions which would undercut the wages of the White workers.

because instinctively the workers realised the dangers ahead if they organised separately.

We have dealt with the Pass Laws and their establishment of labour depots and the reason why they are being established. These labour depots having satisfied the needs of the town, will have a further reserve of labour which will be dammed up in these urban bottlenecks. This reserve labour force will be sent back to the country and a scheme is on foot, known as the Rehabilitation Scheme, which will establish so-called village settlements - read, rural bottlenecks which will receive this redundant labour force. According to Government spokesmen these village settlements will be near forests, and sites for rural industry and other unspecified areas. This is a gigantic swindle. There are, in the first place, no forests in the Transkei and the Ciskei. Nor is it the intention, or has been the intention, of any government in South Africa to establish a rural industry with a permanent and a settled African population. The main purpose of the Rehabilitation Scheme and of these village settlements is to receive the redundant urban labour force and to send them to the mines and the farms.

In the event of these Machiavellian schemes failing to smash the existing Trade Union Movement, another plan is under way. The Government intends forming a Utility Corporation which will recruit African youths between the ages of 14 and 19.

These African labour youth battalions will be hired out to employers for five years and they will receive in the first year two and a half pence a day, in the second year ninepence and the end of the fifth year eightpence. These youth battalions are the Government's latest method of crippling the Trade Unions. These poor children will thus be economically cutting the throats of their fathers.

It is in this light that we want to see all trade unionists view the struggle. A law is introduced ostensibly against the African, but when we analyse the effects of the law we find it working against a working-class as a whole, Black as well as White.

## **WEAKNESSES WITHIN THE AFRICAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT**

It is necessary for us to expose the weaknesses within the African Trade Union Movement in order to bring about a healthier political state of affairs.

There are a number of adverse factors in the Movement. Consider first the professional careerists and parasites who use the trade unions for their own ends. They are openly cynical about it and they see that by means of an efficient espionage system they have no rivals and that no embarrassing political questions are allowed to come up - no questions such as Unity, for instance! To be sure they are not at all concerned with the welfare of the worker, and still less with the progress of the whole race. They are concerned only with themselves and their personal advancement.

Then there are the so-called left political parties who are deliberately bent on sabotaging the Non-European Unity Movement by keeping the Trade Unions, which they control, outside the National Liberatory Struggle. Their arguments are cunning and subtle and cloaked with a great deal of

leftist phraseology. One hears them at Conferences. They start off by agreeing with the political issues raised, but point out that the Unity Movement "should worry itself Less about political problems" and pay more attention to "bread and butter problems" or the day to day problems" of the workers. As a practical proposal they themselves urge a different minimum wage for the white worker, a lower minimum wage for the Coloured and Indian workers and a still lower minimum wage for the African worker. Note the sectional, segregationist approach to the economic questions on the part of these so-called leftists, in other words, the same approach as that of the ruling class to the Non-Europeans. That is the nature of their "practical proposals."

However, the same elemental driving force that moved the African workers to form trade unions in face of and in spite of illegality, will by the same logic break through the barriers of careerists and bureaucrats surrounding and suffocating the trade union movement. Signs are not wanting that there are honest and genuine African trade unionists who view the struggle of the trade unions from the fundamental point of view, against the background of the broad national struggle of the Non-European people.

They see it as one facet of the many-sided National liberatory Movement.

#### **THE COLOURED AND THE INDIAN WORKER**

With the Coloured and Indian worker there is a difference of degree. The trade unions that they are allowed to join are recognised by law. They are allowed to sit with the White workers at Industrial Councils. They are allowed Executive positions. They are even nominated for International labour Conferences overseas - although they never get there! Such a situation is necessary because White labour in these mixed unions must give the impression to the rank and file of the Coloured workers that there is no colour-bar in the union. And the Coloured bureaucrats are happy in their positions as mere stooges to the white labour bureaucracy.

The operation of Colour-bar legislation within industry. all political in character. have produced a sharp deterioration in the economic position of the Coloured workers. There is growing discontent within the rank and file of these mixed trade unions. The Apprenticeship Act. Industrial Conciliation Act. the Factories Act. etc. are all bars that restrict them to the semi-skilled group. with no future while they remain merely nominal members of this form of trade unionism. This type of union boasts of its non-racialistic and non-political policy. "We are impartial"! Both White and Coloured Bureaucrats shout: "We don't introduce racialism or politics in our trade unions". But strangely enough when we analyse the political affiliations of these so-called impartial judges we find them members of the segregationist Labour Party, United Party, National Party and who knows, are not secretly wooing one of the fascist grouplets O.B., New Order or Grey Shirts. This white labour bureaucracy has the full support of the State and it is its function to see that the Industrial Colour-Bar Laws conform to the pattern of South African life - that of the White Brahmin and the Non-European Untouchable. With the leading members of the Non-European workers in these trade unions there is a sense of frustration and helplessness because they are unable to cope with this life of intrigues, and it leaves them baffled and bewildered. They must find an outlet for their pent-up energies. They realise their position as social outcasts. This eats into them, but there is no way out in this blind alley of trade unionism. They are too tired to wage a prolonged struggle against these polished and glib-tongued bureaucrats. And within their own

segregated community they look for compensation and solace. Many of them become prominent members of lodges, benefit societies, football or cricket clubs, churches, social welfare associations, ratepayers and civic associations, temperance and bridge clubs, etc., etc. (All, of course, only for Coloured or Indian membership). They concern themselves less with trade union problems.

These varied organisations receive the full support of the ruling class. It is the easiest thing to approach a John Orr of Kimberley or a Stuttafords of Cape Town for a donation for these worthy institutions of upliftment for our "poor Coloured folk."

They are so solicitous about our welfare and go out of their way to encourage this development within our life. Because they know that it is an excellent means of diverting us from the main struggle the political struggle for full citizenship.

While the father is caught up in this net, his son and his daughter refuses to live this life of sham and make-believe. That is why we find the Teacher's League of South Africa, representing the Coloured teachers, whose members are drawn from the Coloured working class, throwing in their lot with the Non-European Unity Movement. They are sufficiently educated despite the barriers placed before them to realise that their struggle for an educational subsidy for the Coloured child and for a salary on the same basis with the European teacher is intimately bound up with their political struggle for full democratic rights. They have the sense to realise that the economic fight would be meaningless, and the slogan : "Equal pay for equal work" would be a slogan in a vacuum, unless it is related with the political struggle. It must be based on political reality. This has been a most healthy reality. This has been a most healthy development. We have to ask how far has the trade union movement as a whole, come to this all-important realisation? That all our disabilities flow from the lack of political rights and therefore the political struggle, struggle for full democratic rights, must be the central point round which all the rest revolves. I am afraid the answer is that they do not realise it at all, or if they do, they act as if they did not.

It is the duty of the Non-European Unity Movement to point out the extreme danger of the isolationist, sectional, segregationist approach of the Trade Union Movement to its problems, and the short-sighted folly of divorcing the economic struggle from the political struggle. To dissipate the energies of the workers in the separate so-called "day to day" struggle is to deliver them into the hands of the ruling-class and is tantamount to a betrayal of the workers. For it carries out the old, old policy of "divide and rule".

But the Non-European Unity Movement stands for the Unity of all the oppressed people; it sees oppression as a single phenomenon common to all Non-Europeans and the first weapon to forge against it is Unity. Every isolationist struggle on the part of different sections of the Non-Europeans is doomed to failure. We must realise the interconnection between every section, not only of the Non-Europeans, but of the working-class as a whole, White as well as Black.

It is very difficult for the White workers at the present stage-forming as they do a labour aristocracy planted on the back of the oppressed Non-European to realise their identity of interests with all workers. And this



exactly suits the ruling-class, for it is to their interest to have the workers divided amongst themselves. In a period of severe economic crisis, such as threatens to engulf the whole world at a period which is not far off, they will not hesitate to destroy by some means or other the workers chief weapon of self-defence, the trade unions. And the White workers will not escape that crisis. The very existence of a mass of oppressed Non-European workers is a threat to their continuing security, for when it is a Question of profits, the rulers are likely to pay short shrift to the colour-bar.

It is for the White workers, then, to realise while there is yet time their identity of interests with all workers. Now is the time to see the Trade Union Question in its entirety, in its widest perspective, not simply as an economic struggle, but as fundamentally a political struggle. It must be seen against the background of the National Liberatory Movement of all oppressed peoples. One of the reasons why we stress the political aspect of the struggle is that one day we wish to see White and Black workers sitting together as political equals. But it is no use talking in the air about White and Black workers united in a political struggle. It is our firm belief that the slogan "Black and White Workers Unite"! can only become a reality when we proceed along the lines of the Non-European Unity Movement for political equality.

To the White workers the Non-European Unity Movement poses the straightforward Question: either with the oppressor against the Non-European (and ultimately against themselves) or with the oppressed Non-Europeans for the Liberation of all workers and for the liberation of society as a whole!

Let me Quote Point 10 of the Ten-Point Programme of the Non-European Unity Movement: "Revision of the labour legislation and its application to the mines and agriculture. This means specifically the revision of the Industrial Conciliation and Wage Acts. the elimination of all restrictions and distinctions between a European worker and a Non-European worker; equal pay for equal work. This means liquidation of indentured labour and forcible recruitment. the full application of Factory legislation to the mines and on the land. It means the abolition of the Masters' and Servants' Act and the establishment of complete equality between the seller and buyer of labour. It also means the abolition of payment in kind. and the fixing of a minimum wage for all labourers without distinction of race or colour."

But this right will never be achieved without political equality. without Point 1 of the Ten-Point Programme. which reads: "The Franchise. i.e. the right of every man and woman over the age of 21 to elect and be elected to Parliament. Provincial Council and all other Divisional and Municipal Councils."