

A UNITED FEDERATION

-an important key

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To unite or not to unite is not the issue that stalls the prospects of a single, united trade union federation, rather political and tactical differences. At one time over registration and the industrial councils and at another over involvement in community issues. On the other hand there is the prevalent regional and industrial rivalry among unions.

A flash back into our history shows that unity has played a decisive role in the day to day struggles of our people. The South African Congress of Trade Unions, formed in 1955, led our workers during the pound-a-day campaign and other campaigns during the 50's. The greatest fact that contributed to the success of these campaigns was the unity of the workers. It posed a serious threat to the racist regime.

During the roaring fifties it became clear that the unity of the trade union movement found its powerful expression in the alliance with other forces. Immediately after its formation in 1955, SACTU joined the Congress Alliance and thereby made it possible for the workers to challenge the racists in one united voice with all sections of the oppressed people. Issues which affected SACTU and the trade union movement in the 50's are more or less the same as those confronting the trade union movement today:

- A united workers voice in one Federation, one country, one union one industry.
- The independence of the black trade unions vis-a-vis statutory regulations aimed at controlling them.
- Participation in the national liberation struggle.

When the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions (CCOBTU) was formed in 1979 it exactly affirmed the desire by the majority of black trade unions for unity, independence and political rights in South Africa.

The momentous Langa summit in 1981, expressed exactly this desire for one united federation which would unite the workers for their economic demands, at the same time involve them in the struggle for a free, non-racial and democratic South Africa.

All successive boer regimes have been vehemently opposed to these aspirations of the black workers. Whenever black trade unions established themselves, whenever they made a headlong to win the rights of the exploited black workers, the racist regime has always mercilessly crushed it. The post-Rivonia period shows tireless efforts by black trade unions to survive despite bannings and murdering of trade unionists.

The so much talked about reforms in 1979 was a response to this situation, to

tighten the apartheid screw and dampen this latent workers militancy. As we may see, the militancy of the workers was never crushed. Instead organisation of workers continued under clandestine conditions, only to surface into violent confrontation with capital. The 70's is a fine example of this 'relative calm' which erupted in 'spontaneous' strike actions. It is in this context that the Riekert and Wiehahn commissions were set up which among other things recommended the recognition of black trade unions on the basis that they are registered.

REGISTRATION

A union applies to the registrar of the Department of Manpower, submitting its constitution. The constitution is studied, then approved or rejected by the registrar. Upon registration the union is supposed to hand in audited financial statements. The department holds the right of instituting an investigation or to subpoena the union whenever it suspects that it has breached its constitution or is involved in financial malpractices.

According to the Labour Relations amendment Act, unions can only be registered along racial lines. For instance, the Food and Canning Workers Union is a registered union for Coloureds only, it exists with the African Food and Canning Workers Union for Africans. TUCSA unions are organised along this multi-racial pattern in what they call parallel unions. On the other hand, four FOSATU unions applied for registration in late 1982, followed by the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU). However, some eventually became registered. FOSATU unions are non-racial. Some CUSA unions are also registered with exclusively black membership. A majority of the black independent unions are opposed to registration.

INDUSTRIAL COUNCILS

Next is the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1981, which lays down negotiation and settlement of disputes procedures.

Employers are organised in industrial associations on a regional or national basis. For example, there is the Steel and Engineering Federation of South Africa (SEIFESA), the Building Industries Federation of South Africa (BIFSA), the Cape Bakeries Association and the Natal Employers Knitting Association. There are other industrial associations for the textile, motor and chemical industries.

As with registration, a union applies for membership of an industrial council. Its application can be vetoed by other unions who are already members of the council, in most cases being TUCSA affiliated racist unions. Trade unionists represent their unions on these councils.



Sometimes there can be more than one union on the council and they may be divided on issues affecting the workers. One union may buy favours from the employers at the expense of the workers it claims to represent and other unions.

Negotiations are conducted according to procedures laid down by various laws covering wage agreements and working conditions. Disputes between the two parties are referred to the Industrial courts. The black emergent independent trade union movement, dominated by a proliferation of general workers union, does not benefit from participating in these councils. Moreover, industrial councils undermine the democratic structure of the independent unions. i.e. active worker participation in the decision making process.

In the overall, these measures meant that the unions would be put under statutory regulations and patronage of white racist trade unions. This was the reality which confronted the emerging trade

union movement in the 80's, among them being MACWUSA, SAAWU, FOSATU, CUSA, CCAWUSA and others. Similarly, older unions too had to bear with this new subtle racist 'benevolence', the recognition of black trade unions. This was a change of strategy from "bleeding black trade unions to death" to that of cooption and control, summed up by these words by the commissions' findings:

"To deny black trade unions rights would not destroy them, but would spur underground activity, which would be detrimental to the development of industry."

eral of Dr. Neil Aggett.



FROM REJECTION TO CONFRONTATION

A firm rejection of the official bargaining system became a yardstick for determining a progressive trend among the unions at this period. Instead, they strengthened their shopfloor organisation through the development of shopstewards and plant floor bargaining. This trend must be seen in the background of the peculiar pattern along which these trade unions developed, namely general workers unions.

Contributory factors to this development became the regional basis of the trade unions and the large pool of the unorganised black labour force who thronged the union doors. Thus the main drive of the emergent trade union movement was on organisation and strengthening of this organisation through plant bargaining. It was logical that lacking an industrially-based muscle to confront the employers, joining the official bargaining system would be to decapitate their unions. However, some unions abdicated from this stand for tactical, political or other reasons, i.e. four FOSATU affiliates who applied in late 1982, MAWU, NUTW, CWIU and the TGW and some CUSA affiliated unions.

Despite this stand taken by the independent trade union movement against the official bargaining system it recorded a remarkably rapid growth. A labour observer from the Economics department at the University of Cape Town commenting on this growth says: *"Rather than suffering a major disadvantage, the unregistered trade unions benefitted from their militant stand against state control... and increased their strength."*

This growth became a nightmare to the racists and their capitalist blood-suckers as confrontations erupted during the

1981-82 period, with the workers demanding:

- Higher wages;
- Better working conditions;
- Recognition of their trade unions; and
- An end to unfair dismissal and victimisation of workers.

Work stoppages, strikes, go-slow strikes and walk outs became the main weapons to achieve these demands. According to racist estimates, the Department of Manpower released that there were 342 strikes and work stoppages in 1981, while 1982 came with a record figure of nearly 400. On average about 1,000 workers were on strike on each calendar day in 1982.

Typical of the racists, as the murder of Looksmart Ngudle, Caleb Mayekiso, Lawrence Ndzanga, Vuyisile Mini and many other unionists is still fresh in our minds, they mustered their forces in desultory panic to crush this militancy. This time, they murdered Neil Aggett, hounded trade unionists, raided their offices and even mobilised their homeland puppets. Matanzima banned every form of workers organisation, Sebe banned SAAWU and Mangope all South African-based trade unions in Bophuthatswana.

Maybe Gqwetha's case is the most spectacular ordeal. He has been detained eight times without trial since 1981. At one time he faced terrorism charges but was acquitted because of lack of evidence. He lost his mother and uncle in a mysterious fire which broke out in their house and on the day of their funeral his girlfriend, Diliswa Roxisa was shot dead.

To be continued in the next issue.