

Trade Unions: Strength and Weaknesses

MUCH excitement has been generated by the growth of the labour movement in this country — growth which has been seen as heralding a new era in our political scene.

As was to be expected, this movement has been greatly influenced by the dominant political thoughts and, as a result, it has developed in two distinctive trends: the 'nonracial' trade unions on the one hand and the black consciousness-inspired trade unions on the other.

Those who rally round the banner of non-racialism argue that the instruments of change should be embodied in the envisaged change, whereas those under the Black Consciousness banner believe instruments of change need not necessarily be embodied in the envisaged change.

False

In Black Consciousness, we believe in taking into cognisance the material conditions.

Racism in this country is not just an attitude, but it exists in structures and institutions we have to contend with on a day-to-day basis.

These structures are built to enhance and foster the false superiority of white people in this country and experience has shown that, in any partnership of blacks and whites, white people feel it is their natural duty to occupy positions of leadership, power and control.

Education, and exposure to better facilities and life, are used to justify this position.

The trade union or labour movement has been seen by some as the most revolutionary movement capable of ushering in a new social order, while others have dismissed it as a reactionary product of a capitalist society.

Both views are inaccurate and misleading.

While, on the one hand, it is true that trade unionism introduces workers to democratic processes of accepting joint responsibility and joint decision-making, it also sharpens their consciousness to the relationship that exists between them and the means of production and exchange.

This should not be misconstrued as a complete revolutionary process that needs no direction and guidance.

A revolution has been described as "a dialectical progress of historical development" which is "the sum of varied and diverse circumstances, of multiplex elements that together add up and lead to the solution, in a given historical moment, of a crisis that has stubborn and deep economic causes".

With that in mind, the working class as such is not synonymous with a revolutionary phenomenon. If this were true, the picture of the society in our country would have been otherwise.

Values

As many scholars would have it — and we agree with them — the dominant ideas in any given society are those of the ruling class, and sections of the working class in this country have absconded from their fundamental worker responsibilities and embraced the values of the ruling class.

Nay, they have been bolstering the status quo through the exercise of their bourgeois democratic right — the vote.

Concern

We know the rule of one class over another does not necessarily depend on economic or physical power alone, but rather on persuading the ruled to accept the system of beliefs of the ruling class and to share its social, cultural and moral values.

In our country, the labour union movement should be influenced by revolutionary consciousness to transcend its limitations, that straight-jacket it into assuming "a pressure group" character that concerns itself with the amelioration of working conditions.

Discard

The movement must discard its reformist character, that is, being solely concerned with factory-floor grievances and turning a blind eye to both the existential situations in which the workers find themselves, and the material conditions that determine their respective backgrounds.

It should never be divorced from day-to-day rigours and vagaries of living in a racist capitalist society and, for the direction of its programmes, it

must draw from the ethos and pathos of the workers experiences at both factory-floor level and beyond mass and not work systemati-

Workers do not cease to be — or to exist — as people after downing tools at knocking-off time.

As the political writer, Sorel, has said, we believe "the working class alone" — by virtue of its being the most down-trodden and oppressed people in our society — has the moral virtues necessary to rejuvenate society, and that to perform this mission it must have faith in itself and in its purposes.

Our duty is to raise its revolutionary consciousness.

In conclusion, on this potential revolutionary phenomenon — the labour movement, Gramsci has lessons for any serious activist or student of society to ponder upon when he writes: "To expect that a mass, reduced to such conditions of physical and spiritual slavery, could embody a spontaneous historical development; to expect that it would spontaneously begin and continue an act of revolutionary creation — is an illusion of ideologists.

"To rely on the unique creative capacity of such a mass and not work systematically to organise a great army of disciplined and conscious militants, ready for every sacrifice, educated to put their slogans into practice simultaneously, ready to assume effective responsibility for the revolution, ready to be agents of the revolution — not to do this is a real betrayal of the working class and an unconscious counter-revolution in advance."

Imbalance

The Azanian Peoples' Organisation, Azapo's policy statement on trade unions reads: "Realising the imbalance of power between the owners of capital and black workers, we acknowledge trade unions as instruments that can bring about the redistribution of power.

"In the unique situation that is South Africa, trade unions should go beyond the problems of management and labour.

"We envisage a persistently militant system of trade unions which will challenge the discriminatory labour laws of the white minority Government and thereby bring about change."