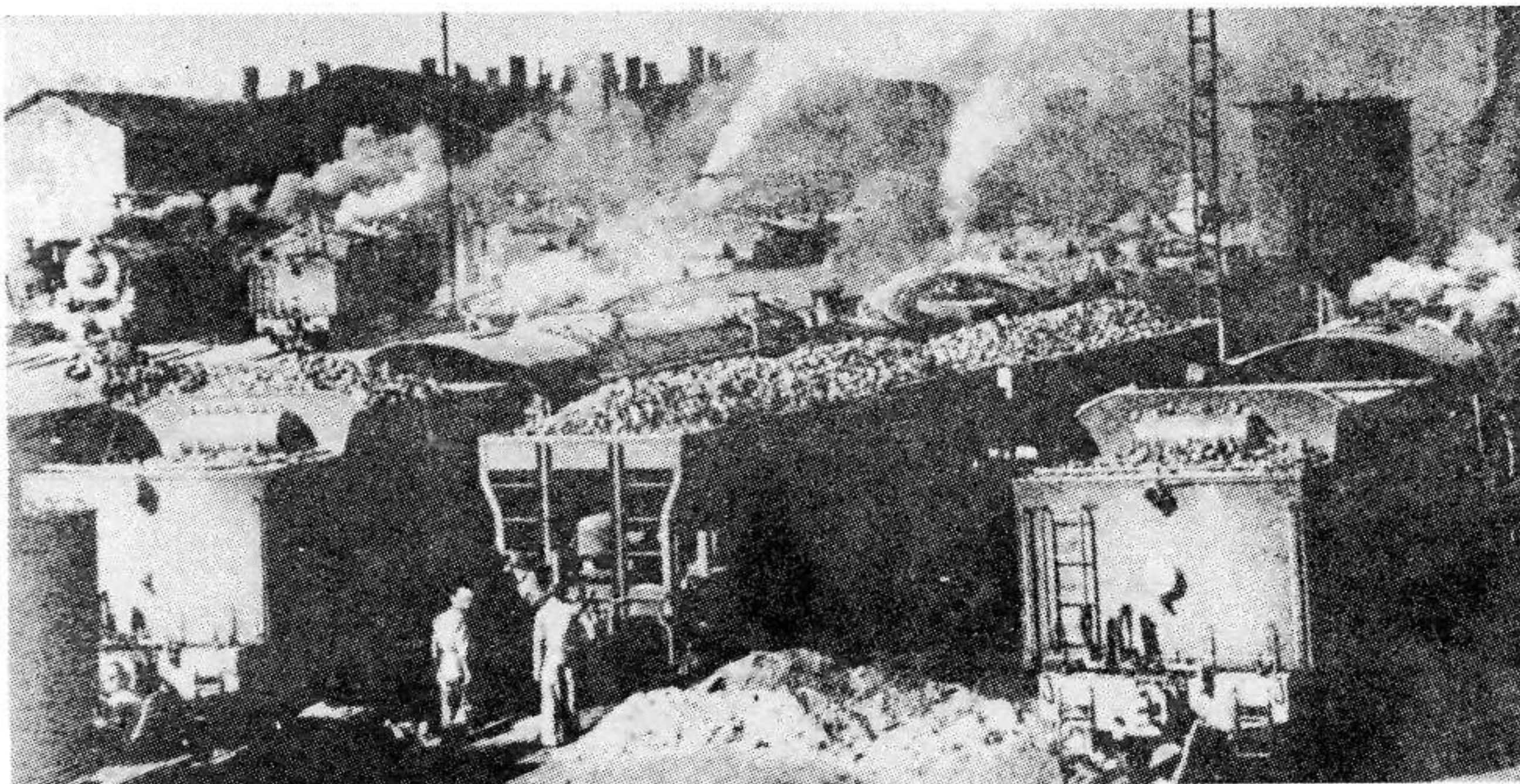


The making of the WORKING CLASS

In the last issue of FOSATU Worker News we looked at the rise and fall of the Trades and Labour Council. Although some African workers were organised into parallel unions by some of the industrial unions in the Trades and Labour Council, little effort was made to organise African workers as a whole. This task was left to the unregistered African unions which joined together to form the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU). This article looks at the rise and fall of CNETU in the 1940's and the early 1950's



The coal yards: Scene of a succesful strike in June 1940

The Council of Non-European Trade Unions was formed in November 1941. Its membership at that time was 37 000, divided into 25 affiliated unions. By 1945, it had grown to 158 000 members and 119 unions, half of which were based in the Transvaal. Just four years later the power of CNETU was broken. Sixty-nine of its affiliates had collapsed, and it had been weakened by internal splits. In 1955 when the remaining CNETU unions joined SACTU only 12 000 members remained. How did CNETU come to be the largest federation of black industrial workers to grow up in South Africa before the 1980's? What caused its rapid decline? To answer these questions we have to look back at the middle of the 1930's.

CNETU was formed out of two groups of unions which had grown up in the middle of the 1930's. The first, the Joint Committee of African Trade Unions, was led by Max Gordon, secretary of the Laundry Workers Union. The second, the Coordinating Committee of African Trade Unions, was led by Gana Makabeni, an old ICU leader who later became secretary of the African Clothing Workers Union.

Both groups concentrated their energies on the Witwatersrand. Here industry was beginning to expand rapidly after the great recession of the early 1930's. The number of African workers working in industry in the Transvaal grew from 36 153 in 1932 to 80 722 in 1936. Wages were extremely low and working conditions were bad. Workers, obviously, needed trade unions to protect them. However, the new unions faced serious problems. Workers were

slow to join because of the failures of the ICU and of the Communist Party linked unions in the late 1920's and early 1930's. Strikes were also heavily repressed. In 1938, for example, Max Gordon's Laundry Workers Union was almost broken when 13 of its leaders were arrested after a strike. The leaders of the new unions therefore started cautiously. The wages of some African workers were fixed by industrial council agreements and wage determinations. Many employers broke the law and paid lower wage rates. The new unions, therefore, started to take up these cases with the department of Labour, which then forced employers to pay back the money they had withheld.

After 1937 the new unions also used the Wage Board, a government committee, to demand new wage determinations for African workers and in this way won many wage increases. Their biggest success came in 1939 when thousands of workers in the distributive trade (working in warehouses and shops) gained a big wage increase in this way. Thousands of distributive workers met at Wemmer Sports Ground to celebrate the victory when it was announced.

As a result of these gains, the unions grew in size. By 1939 Gordon's group had seven unions and 16 000 members. Makabeni's group had ten unions and 4 000 members. The Second World War, which broke out in 1939 and lasted till 1945, pushed unionisation forward even faster. Industry began to produce metal goods, tyres, clothing and many other things for the armies fighting in Europe, North Africa and Asia. Old factories expanded. New fac-

tories sprang up. Thousands of blacks flooded into the towns to find work. At the same time inflation increased. Prices rose by 50 percent between 1939 and 1942. Workers became increasingly dissatisfied and a strike wave swept through South African industry. In 1941 at least 37 strikes broke out. In the first half of 1942 30 more were recorded, and this continued for the rest of the year.

The government was frightened, but it felt unable to use repressive measures. Japan had joined the war on the side of Hitler and had won many victories. There seemed a chance that Japan might even invade South Africa. Whose side would the oppressed black workers fight on then? So the government softened its policy. Influx control was relaxed. The trade unions were given informal recognition, and were asked to settle strikes.

This was a time of great opportunity for the unions. Workers were militant, the government was on the defensive and new unions were being formed. The most important of these was the African Mine Workers Union which was formed in 1941 with the help of the ANC and the South African Communist Party. Finally, in November 1941, CNETU was formed to help coordinate the activities of the different union groups.

CNETU was the first national federation of black industrial unions to be established in South Africa. Although it was strongest in Johannesburg, it also had many affiliates in Port Elizabeth, Pretoria, East London, Cape Town, Bloemfontein and Kimberly. For a time, there seemed a real possibility that it would become the spearhead of the work-

ers' struggle in South Africa.

But CNETU also faced many problems. By the end of 1942 it became clear that the advance of the Japanese armies had been stopped. The South African government also argued that strikes were causing inflation. They therefore passed a law, called War Measure 145, which said that anyone who went on strike would get a fine of 500 pounds (R9 000 today) or three years in prison.

Strikes now became much less frequent. This was partly because trade union leaders were afraid of the fines, but there were other reasons as well. Many of the strikes in 1941 and 1942 had been spontaneous and had been started by workers without the involvement of the trade union leaders. A part of the trade union leadership had got into the habit of relying on the Wage Board and the Labour Department, and did not pay enough attention to building up a strong factory floor base. Also, when Russia joined the war on the side of Britain and America, many South African communist party activists argued that the most important job of workers was to help the war effort. They felt that production for the war should not be damaged by strikes.

There were also other organisational problems. Firstly, most of the CNETU unions had difficulty in building up strong factory floor organisation because of the rapid turn over of workers in their fac-

tories. Workers in many industries only stayed a few months in one job before moving on to another. In transport, for example, labour turn over was 157 percent (that is 157 new workers were employed for every 100 jobs within one year). In the steel industry turn over was 101 percent, while in the food industry it was 90 percent. With so much movement of workers in and out of jobs it was difficult to build up strong factory floor leadership or organisation.

Secondly, CNETU was a national federation, but its affiliated unions were usually not organised nationally. In 1945, for example, when CNETU had 158 000 members, these were divided among 119 affiliates. There were often two or three separate CNETU unions in the same industry. Almost none of them organised beyond one local area.

By 1943 these problems had created serious strains within CNETU. From early on, there had been at least three political 'tendencies' or positions within CNETU. Some of the union leadership supported the South African Communist Party, others supported a 'Trotskyite' position (this was socialist but opposed the South African Communist Party and the policy of supporting the war), still others supported an ANC position. These differences blew up over the issue of strikes. Daniel Koza, who was linked to the Trotskyite group and who led the African Commercial and Distributive Workers Union, demanded more militant strike action and formed

the Progressive Trade Union Group within CNETU. In the 1945 annual conference of CNETU they made their challenge to seize control of the organisation. This failed, and they were expelled.

CNETU was seriously weakened by this conflict. It was finally broken by more repressive government action. After the war ended in 1945 the CNETU unions felt more free to use the strike weapon. By this time, however, it was already too late because the government also felt free to use more repressive action. This became clear in the 1946 mine workers' strike. In August 1946 over 70 000 African mine workers came out on strike for higher wages, led by the African Mine Workers Union. Thirty-two mines out of 45 on the Reef were affected. Police repression was extreme. Striking workers were driven out of the compounds by batons and bayonets and forced to go to work. Twelve strikers were killed and 1 200 injured. CNETU called for a general strike in support, but it was already too weak to carry this out.

More blows to CNETU, came with the arrests of many of its leaders and the banning of many trade union and political leaders under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. By 1953 CNETU had split up. The workers' movement was left leaderless. Only in 1956 was this gap filled when the South African Congress of Trade Unions was finally formed.

The families of the 20 people who were shot dead at Langa on March 21 will find no comfort in the findings of the Kannemeyer Commission.

Mr Justice Donald Kannemeyer has acted much like a father who has found out that his child has seriously erred but is scared to give him a good hiding, instead he only gives the child a sharp rap on the knuckles.

And like a rap on the knuckles, the Kannemeyer report will soon be forgotten. There is little chance that a mere rap on the knuckles will get the South African Police to mend their ways. It was Sharpeville in 1960, Langa in 1985 — where next?

Mr Justice Kannemeyer, appointed to investigate the the Langa shootings, found that:

- Captain Goosen deviously obtained an order banning funerals on Sundays by arguing that if they were held on Sunday they would endanger public peace. He then proceeded to obtain another order saying that the funerals could only be held on Sunday because, if held on a weekday work would be boycotted.

- The funerals planned for March 21 having been banned, the scene was set for a confrontation, an eventuality with which the police were not equipped to deal. Those stationed at Uitenhage had no teargas, rubber bullets or birdshot which are the three standard types of equipment used in riot control.

- The fact that Warrant Officer Pentz had no tear gas prevented him from attempting to disperse the crowd at Maduna square by using it.

- The fact that no rubber bullets or birdshot was available is a matter of grave concern. For riot control police to be in a position where, if they are compelled to take action, the death of rioters was all but inevitable, is one which should have never been allowed to occur.

- The fact that only SSG and no birdshot cartridges were issued both at Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth can only be the result of a policy deliberately adopted.

However, Mr Justice Kannemeyer concludes that 'the blame for the deaths of the persons killed in the incident and for the injuries sustained by others cannot be attributed to the error of judgement or the human frailty of any one person'.

This conclusion is reached by Mr Justice Kannemeyer in spite of the fact that he found that 'had the holding of the funerals not unnecessarily been prohibited on doubtful grounds there can be little doubt that the procession would have passed through Uitenhage without incident along the normal route from Langa to Kwanobule which happens to pass through part of the town.'

And that 'had proper equipment been available the gathering may well have been dispersed with little or no harm to the persons involved.'

Not surprisingly, the government's only response to the Kannemeyer Report has been to say that it would review the procedures for applications for bans on funerals and that it would constantly review the manpower, equipment and training needed by the police to carry out riot control efficiently.

The government has also set up a Board of Inquiry to consider 'matters relating to certain findings by the commission'.

Although, Mr Justice Kannemeyer clears the police of blame for the deaths, in the report he is highly critical of much of their version of what happened at Langa on March 21.

He dismisses the police's story that the crowd was on its way to attack the white residents in Uitenhage because, he says, if this was their intention 'it is improbable that girls and children would have been included'.

Also, he says, that the police's evidence regarding the weapons carried by the crowd is 'exaggerated'. The police had claimed that the crowd was armed with sticks, metal pipes, planks, petrol bombs and stones.

He adds that 'no petrol bombs were thrown at the police or at their vehicles during the confrontation'.

But, he accepts police evidence which said that a Rastafarian and another man near the front of the procession were in possession of petrol bombs although neither of these bombs were ignited.

On whether a boy on a bicycle was at the front of the crowd or not, Mr Justice Kannemeyer says that the boy's presence 'at or near the head of the procession must be accepted and that the police evidence explaining the presence of the bicycle on the scene after the shooting must be rejected'.

Moving on to the 'hail of stones' police claim was thrown by the crowd, Mr Justice

Kannemeyer says 'surprisingly enough none of the crew members of either Casspir were hit by a stone and not a single stone fell into either of the Casspirs....It is incredible that a hail of stones thrown from a distance of ten paces or less should miss all the people at whom they were aimed.'

'No police witnesses can explain why the tarred surface was not strewn with stones immediately in front of the Casspirs. Fouche's suggestion that they must have bounced back and rolled down the incline is unacceptable,' he adds.

'The inevitable conclusion is that the stone attack as described by Fouche and his men was fabricated in order, in part, to justify the shooting. Fouche eventually admitted that the shooting was not caused by this stoning,' he concludes.

However, Mr Justice Kannemeyer dismisses the evidence given by witnesses who said that after the incident police had gathered stones and put them on the road.

'It is improbable that the stones were placed on the roadway by police. First, had they wished to create evidence, one would have expected far more stones to have been used....Had the police decided to fabricate evidence it is inconceivable that they would not have placed stones close to the Casspir,' he says.

In the report, Mr Justice Kannemeyer is also critical of the taunting remarks made by police in Maduna Square before the shooting.

Witnesses said that police in a Casspir shouted 'throw, throw' and 'Ons gaan julle wys vandag'.

Mr Justice Kannemeyer says these remarks are 'particularly disturbing because they were provocative and would have been likely to incite the crowd to retaliation and violence.'

'These are not the types of remarks which the members of a patrol whose duty it is to maintain law and order should make and show a serious lack of discipline.'

However, having said 'some of the police evidence was exaggerated', Mr Justice Kannemeyer goes on to accept the rest of their evidence and concludes that the police were justified in making a stand where they did and that the 'awesome' decision to open fire was understandable.

It is difficult to understand how Mr Justice Kannemeyer can accept that the crowd was on its way to a funeral and not on its way to kill whites in Uitenhage and yet conclude that the police were justified in shooting at least 20 people and injuring at least 137 others.

And his only message to the police at the end of the report is: next time make sure you are properly equipped to disperse 'riotous crowds'. This is hardly enough to prevent the same thing happening again.



Police photograph taken moments after the Langa shooting

Kannemeyer Report