

CRITIQUE OF "PROBLEMS OF AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS".

The following is a letter received criticising an article which appeared in the May issue of the Labour Bulletin. We appreciate this valuable contribution to the debate about the problems and direction of the emerging trade unions and hope that it will be continued.

Dear Madam,
An article appeared in the May issue of your "Labour Bulletin", called "The Problem of African Trade Unions". This letter is written in the hope that your journal published opposing views. It is also written for the purpose of re-opening these issues to a further scrutiny.

From my own experience of trade-unionism, from my meetings with some of the organisers of the unions that encircle Bolton Hall and from statements made in the Press by people connected with the above, I have concluded that this article is titled "The Problems of African Trade Unions", as if the problem arises out of the trade unions being racially circumscribed in the South African context, and not from the method in which these trade unions have been organised, and by whom they have been organised. This is not to deny the very important problems that arise out of being an un-registered union.

It is my belief that many of the problems that confront the labour movement in South Africa, are due to the division of the working class into African and non-African; and the protection of the non-African skilled worker by the State instead of by solidarity.

When one looks at the history of workers' movements, and particularly the one in the first industrial society, England, one sees that the organisation was first formed along 'trade' lines. Skilled workers organised themselves against both unskilled workers and their employers. Such organisation was technically an easier proposition. There were fewer to organise and they were strategically placed in the labour hierarchy, which made their labour withdrawal particularly threatening. The forces of mechanisation (and others) tended to degrade the status of skilled workers to such an extent that the artisan differentiation all but disappeared. Only one course of action lay open to them, and that was to organise their unskilled brothers. Two important structural aspects need to be stressed:

1. The organisers of these unions had a long experience of trade unions.
2. These organisers were organising from within.

In South Africa, the State intervened and provided statutory protection against artisan displacement, and arrested the development of the trade union movement. The historical role of the skilled worker organising the unskilled worker, has in the 1970's fallen on different shoulders. It is therefore important for the organ-

isers to see themselves in a catalytic role rather than an instrumental role.

The problems that the article so authoritatively lists, are not really discussed historically, nor are they seen to have arisen from the peculiar situation of the labour movement in South Africa. The 'white' students who started the unions at Bolton Hall, are neither black nor working class. Their counterpart, the black students in B.A.W.U., are not of the working class. Both groups approach the black working class from the 'outside'. The structure of the unions that they have set up symptomatically mirrors this.

The point which I am trying to make is that these unions were deliberately created by people outside the working class, and this has influenced the way in which these unions have been organised. The problems are very largely the consequences of such organisation.

By contrast we were all trained in the trade-union movement and our attempts at organisation were based upon both an experience as workers and as trade unionists. The 'new' organisers as I have said before have not benefited from either experience. The problems that are facing those unions are, I think, attributable to the methods applied by these novices.

I refer the reader to page 41 of the article where I should like to deal with each of the problems and answers put forward by Linda Ensor.

1. "Workers' attitudes are the key to organisational capabilities.

Beneath all the jargon, the problem seems to be that the workers are not too 'receptive' to unions. External factors such as management, homeland governments, rumours, etc. affect the workers, and either make them unreceptive to membership, or make that membership superficial. The remedies posed; to fiddle with these external determinants so as to produce the right effect on those passive receptacles, the workers. There can be no other interpretation of that section of the article. Nowhere else is this paternal contempt for the thinking capacity of the worker displayed.

I wish to analyse what is at stake here;

a) The problem of attitude is a problem that confronts the union before it arrives from outside, that is to say, it, too, is an external determinant.

b) The workers have no deep-seated need for collective organisation. They are influenced decisively by external factors; namely there is essentially no working class as a class.

c) Attitudes and organisation are separated. The only link suggested in the changing of attitudes by the union, is through 'propaganda'. Once this has been done, the organisation can begin.

One should not be talking about 'attitudes'. Leave that for market research and washing powders. One should be concerned with shifting the organisational momentum from without the factory to within the factory. The preceding article on Leyland suggested such a case. The union was organised from within the factory by the workers themselves.

The problem here, is more the attitude of the union to workers, than the other way around.

2. "Victimization".

This is a real problem. Of course, its only resolution is the collective action of all workers in the particular plant. But by definition of the problem, this is not a course open to the union officials while organising the workers outside the factory gates. This situation of victimization is the product of organising openly in front of the factory gates, and allowing anyone to join (the new organiser is not in a position to judge his enrolling members). Management are alerted and react against individual members.

Perhaps organising unions in such a way that the recruiting is done in a less obvious manner, and therefore is less open to victimization, in that the recruitment is done by workers themselves and the accent is upon comprehensive membership rather than on mass 'sayine lapha' membership, would solve this problem.

3. "Difficulties in maintaining membership".

The problems are posed in technical terms; stop order facilities, collection difficulties (shifts, overtime, etc.). The question is never posed whether the workers themselves should collect and organise. This does not rule out the fact that there are problems in this line of action. I believe, that this is the area where the problem should be thought out.

In regard to the problem of maintaining membership, it is true that the manner in which union dues are collected (an aspect of the collective nature of the union), is going to decisively influence how the workers are going to participate in their unions. The problem of maintaining membership is related to two things;

- a) the present functioning of the union,
- b) the method of signing on.

Both the phenomenal growth (and admittedly a paper growth), and my experience of the recruiting situation at a Pinetown factory, lead me to believe that the workers are press-ganged into joining these unions. Perhaps that is being harsh because workers do want to belong to unions. That, I believe, goes without saying. They are willing to be press-ganged, but they know not into what. The

union membership form is usually accompanied by a list of benefits and that is all. Even if workers pay up regularly, they would still constitute, in my opinion, paper membership.

4. "Financial control and the establishment of committees".

Here at least are some fruitful ideas. The idea of a 'local', run by shop-stewards, is an important contribution to the structuring of these new unions.

It is true that the power of Secretary has a lot to do with the lack of training and experience of the first executive committee; but it is also the product of a 'way of working', handed down. With both the original outside organiser and the typical desire of the 'white' organiser (graduate) to do things himself, the organisers that are trained by him tend to accept his method of working. At least that section devises a catalytic role for the 'outside' organiser.

5 and 6 are both problems that can be met by not alerting management until the union is strong enough both in leadership and in membership. It is also true to say that where the union is strongest, there it is also that the security police have the least influence on either management or workers.

7. "Problems of recognition".

What interests me here, is the question, "is it tactically better to approach the workers or the management, first?". This is a tactic only worth considering if the strategy is to organise outside the gates; recruiting your union individually as they enter or leave.

The alternative is posed, namely, that workers be recruited quietly. But it is taken no further. It is admitted that the meeting might be more successful avoiding the pitfalls of speaking with management and organising openly and therefore incurring managements' wrath. Surely, now, consideration should be taken of this particular view.

The whole way in which the problem is posed makes explicit throughout the whole article the tendency to value the union's relationship to other groups (in this case, management, other workers, police and homeland governments) over and above the relationship between the workers.

To summarise; The problems which have arisen have arisen because of the following attitudes and methods;

1. Organisational work is done almost exclusively outside the gates before and after work. It is necessarily done on an individual basis developing what I would term a client/collection member-

ship.

2. The accent turns then to mass membership and not to structuring and solidifying the workers. The union is really no less atomistic than the workers on their own.

3. The problem of victimization and recognition are both tied up with the fact that management are alerted before the workers have been able to bring themselves together in order to protect themselves against the stratagems of management. The fact that alternative forms of representation (for example, liaison committees) have been able to remain in the factories despite the open and hostile attacks made by the unions concerned, is evidence of this internal lack of structure.

4. The central man in the union becomes the 'organisor' who collects the subscriptions, takes down the complaints, runs the union administration, negotiates with management, etc. This line of thinking ends in bureaucracy, because the staff of the union begin to develop their own interests at the expense of the workers. The central man of the union should surely be the shop-steward, the man on the shop-floor.

5. Instead of bringing workers together, organisers compete amongst themselves to show how many members they have signed on. I hear that in one union this was indeed, encouraged. Membership should be reluctantly extended. Training, discussion and organising should precede membership.

Dear Madam Editor, I hope that you accept these criticisms in the spirit in which they were written. I admire greatly what is being done, but I do not concur with all that is being done.

Black Ex-Trade-Unionist.
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