

AFRICAN WORKERS AND UNION FORMATION
IN RHODESIA

Rhodesia forms part of the periphery of the Southern African economic complex. The conditions of African union formation in this area are the subject of this issue, a collection of short papers by persons who have in varying ways been involved with the Rhodesian labour movement. It is hoped that the volume will contribute to the literature on unionism in Rhodesia as well as be of use in informing union organizers both in Rhodesia and South Africa about certain aspects of the economy and its labour system.

It will be noticed that there are certain similarities in the position of African workers in Rhodesia and South Africa. But there are also important differences, some of degree, others of a deeper nature. For instance, 'legal' African unionism has existed in Rhodesia since 1959 when the Industrial Conciliation Act was amended to allow African unionism and collective bargaining in the 'industrial complex' (excluding domestic households and agriculture). The union struggle in Rhodesia has also been closely tied to the African nationalist political confrontation with the State, through the African National Congress, Z.A.P.U., P.C.C., Z.A.N.U., the African National Council, and, to a lesser extent, the (now) 'reconstituted ANC', formed after the Lusaka conference in late 1974. Some of the important contributions made by the union movement to African nationalism are noted by Brand. Many of the personnel of the two (seemingly) disparate organizations have been closely linked through a common experience of poverty, similar political objectives and organizational difficulties.

Some of the employers whose policies have been the focus of union attention have also been South African based, although they have been representing either multi-nationals or foreign-owned corporations whose parent organizations have been based in the United Kingdom or the United States. Rhodesia has thus been a 'peripheral center' in the Southern African complex. It has been subordinate to South Africa

in business and political affairs, has often moulded its legislation upon South African lines (eg. its Masters and Servants Act), though its particular circumstances have also resulted in the pursuit of independent policies through the State (eg. the particular 'non-legalistic' form of job reservation analysed by Harris).

The central feature of similarity between the two economies has been in the State and employer pursuit of a cheap labour policy in respect of most African workers (upon which Sithole, President of the ATUC, comments). In Rhodesia very few blacks have been absorbed into the skilled ranks. Most have received wages below the PDL, i.e., below the costs of subsistence that must be borne by the family in order to reproduce its labour for supply to the market. The difference between wages received and the minimum costs of subsistence has been met by subsidies from the Tribal Trust Lands which have served as a 'labour reservoir' for employers. There has been no unemployment insurance for Africans in Rhodesia. They have had to rely on 'traditional' social security mechanisms to provide for workers who have lost employment after falling ill or dismissal, and for meeting subsistence consumption requirements in old age. Pensions have only recently been introduced in *some* industries, notably those which have been unionised. Other sources of supplementation have come from 'informal' employment and trading by petty producers, 'artisans' and workers producing commodities for sale. A complex social structure has thus resulted from this pattern of labour mobilization, a pattern that has been complicated by growing stratification within the African work force as a class of semi-skilled workers has emerged.

The problems of organizing workers have bedevilled unionists since the first African strike in the 19th century. Various strategies of action have been devised, some successful, others less so. Davies comments on one aspect of this debate within the labour movement, the question of leadership, international aid and ideology.

At present unions are divided, not simply between skilled aristocratic trade unions (the white - controlled Trade Union Congress with its affiliates -

some of which include so-called 'multi-racial' unions like the Associated Mineworkers Union which are biased towards privileged employees) and others, but also between those African unions leaning towards the ATUC and those inclined towards the (new) National ATUC. There are complex issues involved in these divisions, some over choice of strategy within unions (whether to pursue democratic or élitist unionism) others involving national political and ideological affiliation (between various 'strands' of African nationalist politics).

The problems of union organization at national level are compounded by grass roots difficulties. Some of these problems are discussed in respect of agricultural unionism. Other sectors are unfortunately ignored.

Domestic workers (the second largest group of African workers, numbering 125 000) have no representation. Nor is there any minimum wage legislation applying to this strata of the labour force.

Mineworkers on small mines (about 10 000) are also effectively excluded from the Industrial Council Agreement for the mining industry, which covers 30 000 African workers. And even these technically catered for by the AMWU, itself controlled by skilled members, are in effect *nominally* 'unionized'. Minimum wages for mine labourers in 1974 were 26 cents per 8 hour shift and the 'rations' scale was still based on a 1911 regulation.

Skilled 'multi-racial' unions have been *wholly* undemocratic, the skilled workers having been given special voting privileges (under Section 47 of the ICA) to enable them to dictate the composition of the Executive and thereby the union's policy.

Even many African workers in manufacturing industry are non-unionized and are catered for by paternalist Industrial Board regulations that are decidedly influenced by employer and State policy. The difficulties of obtaining registration are well known to African unionists. And even where Industrial Councils have been established, they have on occasion been de-registered (eg., the I.C. for commercial enterprise in Salisbury in the mid-1960's).

Managerial policies towards unions are typically unsympathetic, though this is not so in all cases. Mothobi discusses a number of management attitudes in his evaluation of the role of myth in maintaining the settler colonial socioeconomic system in Rhodesia. In his own words, 'these beliefs about African workers have no basis in social reality'. What then has been their function?

Managerial ideologies have also changed over time. In the 1940's few employers could bring themselves to even tolerate recognition of African unionism. The 1945 railway strike and the 1948 General Strike, as well as extensive union formation in the 1940's and 1950's, were formative in changing these attitudes. They caused some employers as well as the State to accept the need for unions and recognize their collective power. Ultimately this brought about legislative change.

There is no doubt that African unionism will grow in importance in the future. There are now nearly one million African wage labourers enumerated in the economy out of a population of six million. After allowing for the fact that 50 per cent of the population are under 16 years of age, and that most workers are adult males, it can be estimated that up to 70 per cent of African households in Rhodesia are primarily dependent upon earnings from employment for basic subsistence. Pressures for collective mobilization amongst them will probably grow.

The labour links between Rhodesia and South Africa have always been strong. Clements Kadalie came to Rhodesia in the 1920's to help organize the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union. He brought many influential organizers like Robert Sambo with him. Charles Mzingeli, the inspiration behind the Reformed Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union in the late 1940's, also had strong links with the South African labour movement. Many workers now in South Africa originally came from or through Rhodesia. This year Wenela has contracted with the Rhodesian government to supply 20 000 African one year contract workers for the South African mining industry. This has only been made possible by acute domestic unemployment and an economic crisis in

Rhodesia as well as the peripheralization of its economic system.

The discussions contained in the following papers make comments on a few of these issues. Perhaps some of those not covered could be the subject of a subsequent volume.

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