

by C.M. Brand

In Rhodesia it is not difficult to be involved in 'politics', especially if you are black. In a situation where the whole fabric of social and economic life is underwritten by minority domination, any challenge to, and often merely questioning of, a particular aspect of society is likely to be interpreted in a political light. For you cannot challenge inequality without by implication also challenging its guarantor, white power.

THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN SITUATION

As a consequence of Imperial dominance during the nineteenth century many Southern African institutions came to be modelled on British lines. The fact that their eventual form in most instances turned out to be rather different from the British prototype is largely due to the racial situation. It was well understood that autonomous institutions in the black community would in time undermine the security of the white state. This is also why the emergence of black unions was strictly controlled. In Rhodesia they could, in fact, not exist officially until 1960 when the revised Industrial Conciliation Act came into operation. Although this legislation was supposed to foster 'multiracial' unions, it was - and still is, - colonial in concept, allowing as does for the close supervision of formal union activity by the Department of Labour.

Thus in Southern Africa the right of government to interfere with, or even dictate in matters affecting industrial conciliation has been commonly accepted. This follows from the paternalistic assumption that participation in state politics is largely a prerogative of whites and that blacks primarily need to be *administered* in their own interest, seeing that they are not competent to look adequately after themselves anyway. Hence they are expected to be the passive and grateful subjects of the dominant group's policy designs. Merely to look this 'gift horse' in the mouth is to meddle in politics in an uncalled for manner. Any organised

black initiative in the sphere of trade unionism - other than supplications to the authorities - is therefore likely to be viewed with suspicion as agitation. By the same token, any black leader who does not 'know his place', is automatically branded as a political trouble-maker.

UNIONS AND POLITICS IN RHODESIA

Ironically, successive governments in Rhodesia have unwittingly contributed to the politicisation of unions through their precipitate use of police and troops in the case of strikes. Their close involvement in the routine regulation of labour organisation, and power to intervene in industrial disputes, which has been enhanced by recent amendments to the 1960 Act, has tended further to identify government with the 'enemies of the workers', rather than as the mediator between employers and employees.

THE FORMAL STANCE OF AFRICAN UNIONS

What course has the African unions, then, decided to follow in Rhodesia in the face of these odds? The formal stance of most union leaders since the Second World War has been that of 'non-involvement' in politics. Not that there was much opportunity for political activity until the middle-fifties and the emergence of the new African National Congress (or the 'liberal' multi-racial groups). But with the rising wave of nationalist sentiment, especially after the turn of the decade, the pressures on the labour movement to commit itself actively to the struggle became immense.

That it continued to take a prudent, strictly 'unionist' stance was principally due to two factors. First, the leaders clearly recognised the risks this would entail in possible detention or restriction for themselves and the banning of their organisations. This would have been a high price to pay at a time when many young unions were just in the process of getting on their feet. Secondly, their principal, albeit still very limited, outside contact

had been with Western movements which emphasized the need for independence and a relatively circumscribed industrial role for unions. After 1960, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions got heavily involved in the local scene through regular two-way personal contact, financial sponsorship of unions, and later the appointment of a permanent local representative. At more than one critical juncture, the I.C.F.T.U. intervened more directly, not without success, to steer leaders away from too close an alliance with nationalist politicians. This did not mean that individual union members, or leaders, did not join the nationalist parties or actively supported them in their personal capacity. The large number who were detained by the government at various times, attests to this fact. But the convention that one could not hold office in, or speak for, a union or party at one and the same time, was fairly strictly adhered to.

MORE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT

Only during two brief periods did part of the local movement become more directly, if still covertly, involved in politics. The first was during the initial twelve months of the existence of the Southern Rhodesia African Trade Union Congress (S.R.A.T.U.C.) after it had broken away from Reuben Jamela's Trade Union Congress (S.R.T.U.C.) early in 1962, during which time it periodically dispatched or actually maintained envoys in various African capitals. The second was with the establishment of a splinter, the Zimbabwe African Congress of Unions (Z.A.C.U.) which, as its initials would suggest, was in more than close sympathy with the Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union (Z.A.P.U.) and also sought to forge pan-African links. It was banned by the government in 1965, but unfortunately the African Trade Union Congress had by now come to be associated in the popular mind with the Zimbabwe African National Union (Z.A.N.U.), so that a successor to Z.A.C.U. soon emerged in the shape of the National African Federation of Unions (N.A.F.U.). Although all attempts to effectively unite the two factions have failed to date, it can safely be said that the significance of the nationalist division has tended to recede into the back-

ground within the labour movement long before the recent achievement of a united political front under the banner of the African National Council.

A SEPARATE WORKERS' CONSCIOUSNESS

If a few did see the labour movement as an important instrument of political liberation the lesson of what was already happening in independent Africa, where national centres were generally being co-opted into the governing party, was not lost even on some of the more radical unionists. Thus Josiah Maluleke, who led the 1962 S.R.A.T.U.C. breakaway, is reported to have once declared :

'We as a trade union are fully prepared to throw our weight behind the nationalist party's fight - after all, we all want to get rid of the present minority government, but we want to do so as workers, with our own organisation. For after independence the party will be the government and will be as much concerned as any government to increase production to develop the country. This may happen at the expense of the workers' wages and general standard of living. Then we want our own organisation to defend our position and our rights; if we, then are merely an arm of the party we as workers will be defenceless.'

FULL SYMPATHY WITH NATIONALIST AIMS

Whereas there has been, therefore, a formal policy of (political) non-alignment, there can be no doubt about the fact that the African Labour movement has all along been in *full* sympathy with nationalist aims. As such its stance must simply be seen as a *strategy* for survival both in the short run (under white domination) and the long run (under black government). This can also be seen clearly in the way in which labour leaders ventured to step into the breach during periods when nationalist activity was curtailed, either by acting as spokesmen for a wide range of African grievances - as has frequently been the case after U.D.I. - or attempting, in individual

capacity, to get a new party launched, as happened after the banning of the African National Congress in 1959.

TRAINING GROUND FOR NATIONALIST LEADERS

The fact that the unions have provided an invaluable training ground for nationalist leadership should not be overlooked as well. The significance of this contribution is put into proper perspective when one contemplates the limited amount of black organisational initiative which has emerged under the adverse political conditions existing in Rhodesia. Among the most notable figures who started their careers in the unions are men like Z.A.P.U. President, Joshua Nkomo (in the old Rhodesia Railways African Employees Association), George Nyandoro (in Mzingeli's post-war Reformed Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union), Michael Mawema (also in the Railway union) and J.Z. Moyo. The role that the labour movement has played in the broader politicisation of the ordinary worker is much more difficult to establish. But if one studies the impact of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union during the 'thirties, the Federation of African Workers' Unions in Bulawayo immediately after the war, Benjamin Burombo's African Workers' Voice Association and the 1948 General Strike, and the varied career of a man like Charles Mzingeli, one comes to the conclusion that if the labour movement did not actually spawn the rise of a modern mass nationalism, it certainly contributed immensely to its emergence.

THE FUTURE OF LABOUR IN ZIMBABWE

What about the future of labour in Zimbabwe? Experience in independent Africa has indicated that the attempted cooptation or political control of unions has neither depoliticized nor completely emasculated them, so that organised labour remains a force to be reckoned with, in most instances out of proportion with its actual numerical or organisational strength. This has been due largely to the

identity of interests of the employed class; their concentration in the centres of power, the towns; their ability to organise on a trans-ethnic and trans-regional basis; and their position in the key service industries, notably in communications and transport. On this basis the unions can be expected to play an important part in Zimbabwe. The labour force employed in the cash economy in 1973 constituted 15 per cent of the total black population of about six million, which puts it ahead of most of, if not all, the other countries of black Africa which have percentages ranging between two per cent and fourteen per cent.

The comparative weakness of traditional associations and the difficult political climate in Rhodesia also means that workers' associations have had a head-start above many others. It is likely that a number of their most capable leaders would be siphoned off into public positions when blacks achieve a significant, or the controlling, share of power, but there is sufficient depth of talent in the larger unions to compensate for this. Finally, there is little doubt that the past experience of the labour movement in walking the political tight-rope both in the face of government surveillance and nationalist disunity, is likely to stand it in good stead in the future. The complexity of the situation can only have added to the sophistication and determination and determination of the leadership that survived, and the years of restricted operation have ironically provided an opportunity for much needed organizational consolidation. A freer atmosphere is likely to lead to a considerable increase in membership and activity, which should put workers in a relatively strong position in their dealings with government and employers.

FUTURE ATTITUDE TO 'POLITICS'

But what should the attitude of future labour leaders be to 'politics'? They should clearly advance the aspirations and demands of workers as cogently and forcefully as possible at all times, realising at the same time that the workers by themselves cannot adequately represent the will of the people or the nation as a whole. For unionized workers only

constitute a relatively small proportion of people and often a comparatively privileged section at that. Workers should, therefore, also encourage, and perhaps even sponsor where necessary, the organization of other sections of the population, such as the non-organized groups, the self-employed individuals in the so-called 'informal' sector, independent craftsmen, and even the unemployed. At the same time the right of other groups such as farmers, traditional associations, women's groups, etc. to press for a response to their needs and aspirations, should be recognised. The idea of a strictly workers' government as such is in Africa, as elsewhere, a perversion and illusion.

THE RIGHT TO REPRESENT WORKER INTERESTS

On the other hand, just as insistent as the unions should be on their right to represent the interests of workers, so must they emphasise that no government by itself could adequately know and enunciate the wishes of workers, even in the unlikely event of it consisting solely of former workers. For those who occupy the key positions of power invariably develop perspectives and interests of their own. That there would be conflicts and counter-demands between different groups within the state must be accepted. It is healthy and normal, and therefore adequate provision should be made for these conflicts to work themselves out through consultation, bargaining, and the orderly struggle for power, wherever possible. This is why a strong voice and representation for as many of these groups as possible should be sought within the political framework of the state. The job of unions is to guarantee such power for the workers.

C.M. Brand
Dept. of Sociology
University of Rhodesia