

TRADE UNIONS—WEAPONS FOR FREEDOM

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I SEE in New Age and other papers that Industrial Conciliation Boards these days often result in a deadlock. This means that no wage increases or improvements in conditions are granted to workers.

Therefore some trade unionists have concluded that it is no use applying for Conciliation Boards or having registered trade unions. In fact there is a growing feeling that the whole wage-fixing machinery is bad for the workers. This machinery, it is said, is the cause of illusions created in the minds of the workers that all they need is a registered union to obtain wage increases.

No doubt there are trade union leaders who have given the workers this illusion. On the other hand we should not go to the opposite extreme of condemning the system of collective bargaining lock stock and barrel, unless we have a better alternative.

Let us look at the Industrial Conciliation Act. It was introduced by the Smuts Government after the Rand revolt of 1922 when Smuts said "never again." The Act provides for the registration of trade unions, machinery for the settlement of disputes by negotiation between workers and bosses. In other words, its purpose is to avoid strikes and achieve "peace in industry." The method adopted is to establish industrial councils or conciliation boards consisting of an equal number of workers and bosses.

The definition "employee" excludes the African workers. Until the Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act came into operation in 1953, African women were employees in terms of the Act. This pernicious discrimination divides the ranks of the workers and is partly responsible for the weakness in trade union organisation and the poverty and slums and tuberculosis that the African and all other Non-European low paid workers have to live under.

The South African trade unions demanded every year at their annual conferences that the definition be amended to cover African workers. Many trade unions supported this demand because they feared that the African would work for lower wages and would thus undermine their Industrial Council Agreements. Parliament amended the Act in 1937 and gave Industrial Councils power to fix wages for Africans. But few trade unionists were satisfied that this amendment would give the artisans sufficient protection against undercutting.

On the other hand many trade unionists objected to the discrimi-

nation on entirely different grounds. These militant trade unionists condemned the Industrial Conciliation Act because it weakened the strength of the workers, firstly by splitting them on racial grounds and secondly by limiting the right to strike. We recognised, however, that the right of collective bargaining was an advantage for which the workers had struggled and suffered much during the early days of trade unions. We did not think of scrapping the principle of collective bargaining; what we wanted was its extension to Africans and improvements by recognising unlimited freedom to strike.

PROBLEMS IN SECONDARY INDUSTRIES

The Industrial Conciliation Act and the Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act have created a very serious problem for workers in the secondary industries. These employ large numbers of Africans, Coloureds and Indians. Although they often do much the same kind of work, Coloured and Indian workers are able to have registered trade unions. These can and do utilise the I.C. Act machinery to negotiate with employers. If strong, they are successful, but, as I have already remarked, in many cases negotiations break down. One reason is that employers have become more stubborn. They are aware that the Government is on their side.

But there is another and more serious problem. In many industries there is a large and growing number of African workers. They cannot belong to the same union as their fellow workers. The African unions do not fully participate in wage negotiations. This division is bad. It weakens the registered trade unions. Whilst the Coloured and Indian workers, when negotiations break down, can go on a legal strike, the African workers have not got this right. In fact under the Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act they run the risk of going to jail. What is more serious is that if they lose their jobs they are chased out of their homes and the towns, back to the farms and reserves. This means that those Africans who have been organised, and who understand the meaning of a trade union, become scattered. The union is weakened and empty places are filled by peasants and migrant workers who are not accustomed to trade unions. (There have been several recent cases of this kind, such as the strike of the African workers at the United Tobacco Co., Durban.) Consequently the Coloured and Indian workers do not feel confident to strike if Africans are left in the factories, as the strike cannot be successful. To call the African out is a great responsibility.

This position has created a feeling of frustration and resentment towards the whole system of Industrial legislation. Conciliation Boards reach a deadlock because the registered trade unions cannot be certain to pull off a strike, to tie up the factory or industry.

This feeling of frustration has led some people to suggest that the registered unions should not apply for Conciliation Boards, but in fact should deregister, and that the Industrial Conciliation Act machinery

should not be used. The argument is that by giving up registration certificates the present statutory differences between African and Coloured and African and Indian workers will disappear. The African workers will have no reason to consider themselves "inferior." The Coloured and Indian workers will have no reason to consider themselves "superior" and there will be more chance of unity and concerted action.

DECLINE IN STRIKE ACTION

Before discussing this argument I think it will be useful to consider briefly the record of industrial disputes before and after the introduction of wage-fixing machinery. This is set out in the following table:—

Period	No. of strikes	No. of workers involved	Aggregate duration in working days	Estimated loss in wages
1911-15	24	43,442	266,801	299,050
1916-20	168	136,771	1,428,176	430,491
1921-25	46	40,799	1,462,734	1,952,965
1926-30	47	19,684	23,151	10,014
1931-35	70	16,626	168,386	85,944
1936-40	116	18,622	47,129	15,190
1941-45	183	36,939	137,781	45,756
1947	64	28,012	1,372,757	1,880,446
1948	44	3,952	24,608	19,009
1949	37	7,143	50,848	133,170
1950	33	3,277	15,871	4,625
1951	36	7,994	12,555	13,757
1952	54	6,559	22,217	14,097
1953	30	2,298	9,216	44,102

In reading the table we should bear in mind that it is not a true statement. Certain strikes have been omitted, such as those which took place between 1950 to 1953 in protest against the Nationalist Government's fascist legislation and interference with free trade unionism. Nevertheless, even if these strikes were included the table would show a proportional marked decline since the Nationalists came into power.

This decline is to some extent a continuation of a process that has been at work since the introduction of industrial legislation in 1924.

It will be noticed, however, that a remarkable increase in strike activity occurred after 1936. This must be attributed to the movement amongst the Africans (who then also were excluded from the industrial conciliation machinery) and low-paid Coloured and Indian workers who were coming into trade unions round about this period.

What has changed since 1945 to bring about a decline in strike action? Clearly it is not the industrial legislation as such. The African suffered the same disabilities in the 1930's and 1940's as today, whilst the Coloured and Indian trade unions have the same freedom to strike now as they possessed in the earlier period. Can we explain the decline in strikes on the grounds of improved industrial relations and conditions of employment?

Whilst there has been full employment in the post-war period the steep rise in prices has undoubtedly reduced the actual value of wages. These conditions lead to a wave of militant action in other countries, both in the great industrial countries like the U.S.A. and Great Britain and also in underdeveloped territories such as Northern Rhodesia and West Africa. I do not believe that conditions here are so good that the low-paid workers have not felt it necessary to press for improvements.

I should say that there is in the first place greater intimidation by the ruling class and resistance on the part of both employers' and Government to wage demands. One might expect that this resistance would lead to greater working-class militancy; we must realise that the Non-European low-paid workers are living under a hostile police state, with vicious attacks on civil liberties and free trade unions since 1948. The removal of the best and most experienced trade union leaders who were almost wholly responsible for organising and leading the low-paid workers, deprived large numbers of workers of guidance when they most urgently needed it.

This difficulty of political repression would clearly not be overcome if registered unions were deregistered. The workers will have to battle for elementary trade union rights like workers in other countries have done and won these rights, and like workers are doing it now elsewhere on the African Continent.

The African worker must still win the rights for free trade unions. He has to do this job. No one else will win these and other democratic rights for him. The English workers fought for the rights to organise and to strike. The fact of the matter is that the African worker has fewer trade union rights than the British workers had 100 years ago.

The fundamental problem to us is that the African worker has not got the right to strike, the most elementary right of workers. Conciliation Boards break down because Coloured and Indian workers feel too weak to strike on their own and the Africans have no right to strike. The employers are aware of this weakness and of the general

trade union disunity. But there are no short cuts. We dare not become frustrated and impatient. We must develop trade union organisation at the point of production.

Our present weakness is the absence of trade union organisation amongst African workers. When the workers have overcome this weakness they will be powerful enough to smash the repression which is now holding them back. It is then that industrial legislation will be reshaped to suit the workers' interests.

The truth of the matter is that the level of trade union organisation is very low. A great number of workers are not only unorganised but also politically backward. But our main weakness is that we have not enough experienced trade union leaders and organisers who will develop and give political and trade union understanding to the workers. The scarcity of African, Coloured and Indian trade union leaders is a major weakness. My opinion is that although the National Liberatory movement passed resolutions to support the organisation of workers in trade unions, it is not yet really conscious of its importance. Why don't we find young educated African, Coloured and Indian persons coming forward ready to sacrifice, ready to organise their people?

To get workers interested in trade unions, day-to-day demands must in no case be considered as of secondary importance. The closest attention must be given to the small grievances and demands in each factory and workshop. Starting from simple petitions and deputations to the management, the workers will go on to strike action.

Let us remember that the African workers always have had to grapple with laws prohibiting their strikes, such as the Native Labour Regulation Act of 1911, the Master and Servants Act and the War Emergency Regulations of 1942 which were only repealed when the Native Labour Settlement of Disputes Act came into force. African strikes have nevertheless taken place and succeeded in winning improvements. The Durban dock strikes are an example.

The issue is clear—the task is to organise this growing force of labour as shown in the following table:—

TOTAL NUMBER OF WAGE EARNERS EMPLOYED IN THE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES

Year	Europeans	Africans	Coloureds	Indians
1925	56,433	82,608	27,391	10,026
1935	92,919	112,091	27,352	9,879
1945	128,071	245,538	58,719	17,492
1950	191,291	327,351	79,988	21,559

The workers' strength lies in unity. They must unite to overcome divisions fostered by the Government and boss class. They must unite

to struggle for bread, for their economic and social needs. They must unite, struggle and win trade union and democratic rights!

The 1886 Congress of the 1st Working Men's International resolved that:

"In addition to their original tasks the trade unions must now learn how to act consciously as focal points for organising the working class in the greater interests of its complete emancipation. They must support every social and political movement directed towards this aim."

How true these words are for us!