

# TRADE UNIONS FACE THE FUTURE

By MICHAEL HARMEL

"White workers complain of the threat to their standard of life by the Native, the Coloured worker and the Indian. Can they avoid the threat becoming even more menacing by ignoring the Trade Union organisation of such workers? It is on this rock that South African Trade Unionism must build or break."

—"Labour Organisation in South Africa," by E. Gitsham and J. F. Trembath, published in Durban in 1926.

**T**HE voluntary liquidation of the Trades and Labour Council marks the closing of a chapter in South African labour history. It also marks the beginning of a new one.

Progressive trade unionists have just emerged from a bitter struggle in which they fought, and rightly so, to preserve the T. & L.C. This they did for many reasons, but above all for the sake of the noble principle which its founders had inscribed in the Council's constitution: that it should be open to unions of workers of South Africa without regard to colour, nationality or sex. It is only natural that in the course of that struggle they should have recalled and emphasised this and other merits of the Council, which, their right-wing opponents, in their unseemly haste to "unite" with McCormick and other admirers of Ben Schoeman, were only too anxious to forget.

Now, that battle is over. The T. & L.C. is gone. Its former leaders, with hypocritical cries of "trade union unity" have climbed aboard the apartheid wagon. It is left for the minority which fought to the bitter end to keep the banner of workers' unity aloft, to seek a regrouping of the forces of genuine trade unionism in a new federation that will truly represent all sections of the workers of our country. This regrouping has already begun. The minority which fought against dissolution of the T. & L.C. at Durban has joined forces with the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions in preparing for a national conference to found a new trade union centre which, unlike the "Trade Union Council" will welcome African unions to full and equal membership.

In order that the new federal organisations it becomes vitally necessary to analyse the movement afresh; to review not only the merits of the late Trades and Labour Council, but also its failures and defects. And this must be done frankly and fearlessly, without regard to personalities.

We should not look upon the dissolution of the T. & L.C. as a sudden happening. On the contrary, the Council has been disintegrating for a number of years. The white miners' union had long ago seceded. The McCormick-Downes group had left to form their own colour-bar Federation of Trade Unions. The Amalgamated Engineering Union and others had defected from the T. & L. C. What happened at Durban was merely the last act in the destruction of the body which Bill Andrews and others had laboured thirty years ago to establish.

*The disintegration of the Trades and Labour Council was not an accidental process. It sprang out of profound weaknesses and flaws in the make-up of that body, in the make-up of the unions which constituted it. Only by understanding and avoiding those weaknesses will the new trade union movement be able to withstand the hammer blows of fascist reaction, and to play a useful part in defending the vital interests of the workers and in building a free South Africa.*

## The British Connection

It will help in reaching this understanding if we briefly review certain features in the development of the movement.

The first trade union in the country is believed to have been started in the Cape Colony in 1881. It was a Cape Town branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, a union with headquarters in England. This is a significant fact, and indeed close links with the British unions characterised the movement in this country for many years. A great many South African unions were formed as branches of British organisations. Though most of them have since broken away from the parent bodies and achieved full independence,\* the British origins of the movement have left a deep and abiding impression.

The British workers were the first in the world to organise themselves into trade unions, and no-one can read a good history of the movement (such as the classic book by Sidney and Beatrice Webb) without feeling inspired and uplifted by the struggles and sacrifices of the pioneers of the movement, working men who faced prison and deportation in the task of uniting their fellows to resist the merciless exploitation of the employing class. The capitalist Governments of England passed "Anti-Combination Acts" and other laws to make trade unionism illegal, and all the resources of the press and the pulpit were harnessed to denounce the unions as the work of the Devil. Undeterred, the brave trade unionists carried on their work, meeting secretly to evade the police and the

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\*The Amalgamated Engineering Union, still nominally attached to the British body, is today, I believe, the only exception.

agents of the employers, and taking care to discover and expose spies and provocateurs sent into the organisations. More and more they came to realise that their struggle was not only one for "fair" standards of wages and conditions, but ultimately a political fight against the governing class, for the right to make the laws of the country, and to transform into public property the natural wealth and the great industrial enterprises, the ownership of which placed in the hands of a greedy and selfish minority the power of life and death over the masses of the people.

The trade union movement which they founded stands today as a monument to the pertinacity and the practical organising genius of the British working man. But it is a far cry from the early days of fierce State repression and revolutionary heroism to the present Trade Union Congress of Britain, whose upper leaders have become pillars of respectability aspiring to knighthoods and the peerage, and as fearful as any capitalist of strikes and radical socialism. The recent dockers' strikes, in which the role of the official leaders of the big unions was restricted to fruitless appeals to the men to go back to work, showed quite clearly that militant workers' actions in Britain today can only be expected when the rank and file go ahead without the blessing — indeed, against the opposition — of the entrenched bureaucracy in Transport House.

It would be wrong to ascribe this degeneration of former fighting organs of working class struggle merely to the "British national character," or to the narrow "practicalism" which has rejected the advanced political theories of the workers' movements on the continent of Europe and elsewhere. What has led to this rejection of theory, this abandonment of the brave ideas of world-wide proletarian unity and the socialist commonwealth, which marked the stormy beginnings of the movement?

The answer must be sought in the broader historical developments that have taken place; above all in the dominant position of Great Britain as the centre of a vast Asian and African empire, whose monopolists and finance-capitalists draw tribute and super-profits out of the exploitation of the wealth and sweated labour of hundreds of millions of dark-skinned people abroad. It was this situation (paralleled in Germany, France the U.S.A. and other imperialist countries) which allowed the English ruling class margin to manoeuvre. It was these vast super-profits which gave them a margin to tame the rebellious spirit of the organised workers by conceding reforms to them. And in particular, to concede legality and an official status to the trade union movement — at a price. *That price was the support of the "Labour leaders" for British imperialism and the capitalist system.*

The British imperialists could not hope to twist or intimidate incorruptible and clear-headed leaders like Tom Mann, James Connolly and Willie Gallacher, nor could they quell the fighting spirit of the British working class, shown in a hundred valiant struggles. But consciously or unconsciously (the higher up in the hierarchy the more conscious has the process been), the corruption of imperialism has eaten into the structure of British trade unionism, and its political expression in the Labour Party; the "civil servant" type of office administrator has replaced the workshop agitator as the "ideal" type of trade unionist, while the "Labour Government" of Attlee and Bevin after the war followed a line of policy, at home and abroad, approved in all its essentials by Churchill and his Tory colleagues to whom, in due course, they handed back intact the administration of capitalist Britain.

Both these elements that have gone to make up British trade unionism — the fighting tradition of the pioneers and the militants of today, on the one hand; the kept bu-

reuteracy of Transport House on the other — have gone into the making of South African trade union history, modified of course, moulded by the strains and stresses of a multi-racial, colour-bar society.

We, too, have had our heroes of labour. R. K. Cope, the present Editor of *New Age*, has told the story of many of them in his classic history "Comrade Bill," and even today, thirty-two years afterwards, it is impossible to read without emotion how, framed up after the 1922 strike, "Taffy" Long, H. K. Hull and D. Lewis went forward to the gallows singing "The Red Flag." Names like Tom Mathews, Colin Wade, J. T. Bain, Clements Kadali, C. B. Tyler and, not least, the heroic subject of Cope's biography, W. H. Andrews himself, illuminate the stormy annals of early trade unionism in South Africa, no less than the scores of unknown soldiers of labour who lost their lives when police and the military fired on strikers in 1913, 1922 and 1946.\*

Nor has South African trade union history lacked scoundrels of the

Archie Crawford type, who used the movement as a stepping stone for their own personal ambitions, and became professional strike-breakers and agents of the capitalist class. But individual greatnesses and failings tend to cancel each other out. It is, in the last analysis, not to the role of various individuals but to the actual social and economic conditions which produced them, that we must turn our attention if we would gain a clear understanding of the movement.

The two great turning points in South Africa's labour history were the Witwatersrand miners' strikes of 1922 and 1946: the first of European the second of African workers. On each occasion the Union Government, the creature of the Chamber of Mines, responded to the workers' demands with bloody violence and repression justified by wild lies about "revolution." In each case the strikes met with apparent defeat, the workers being driven back to work without realising their demands. In each case the strikes were followed by profound and far-reaching repercussions.

## The Aftermath of 1922

Prior to 1922 the attitude of the capitalists and their Government to the trade union movement was very much that of the British bourgeoisie in the days of the anti-Combination laws: "Crush this evil monster that threatens our "freedom" to exploit labour as we choose." Very much, indeed, that of Mr. Schoeman and the employers towards African trade unions today. During the railway strike of January 1914, martial law

was proclaimed, trade unionists and Labour M.P.'s were arrested, and nine trade unionists were seized at midnight, on the orders of General Smuts, who was Minister of Defence in the Botha Cabinet, put secretly and illegally aboard the steamship "Ungeni" and deported to England. *South Africa* a paper owned by the mining magnate, Sir Abe Bailey, wrote just before these kidnappings:

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\*During the general strike of July, 1913, a demonstration took place outside the Rand Club, haunt of the mining magnates. Troops were called and, together with the Club members shooting from the windows and the roof, opened fire on the crowd. A young Afrikaner, Labuschagne, stepped into the street and shouted: "Stop shooting women and children, you bastards. Shoot me!" "At the same time," writes Cope, "he tore his shirt open to bare his chest. From point blank range a trooper deliberately shot him through the heart."

"A number of anarchists in the sub-continent have been hunted down and trapped like vermin. Many of the social snakes of the country are now occupying prison cells preparatory, we sincerely trust, to banishment from the land . . . We distinguish between honest workers and the reckless blackguards who have used the men for their abominable purposes."

The Rand Strike of 1922, when troops and bombing aircraft were called up by Smuts to massacre civilians, was the bloodiest expression of this Fascist attitude towards the white labour movement. It was also the last time, up to now at any rate that the Government resorted to force against European workers. Smouldering with resentment, and mourning their dead, the workers went back to the mines; but it was not long before the Smuts Government paid for the universal unpopularity it had incurred among the voting population by going down to defeat before the combined forces of the old Hertzog Nationalist Party and Creswell's reformist Labour Party. The "Pact" Government soon passed a law to provide a colour-bar on the mines, as demanded by the white miners.

Even more far-reaching was Smuts's introduction, in 1924, of the Industrial Conciliation Act.

Seen in relation to the miners strike and other militant actions taken by white workers at the time\*, it would seem that the ruling class had ample reason to seek some compromise with the trade unions. But there was a new and compelling factor forcing the Chamber of Mines and Smuts from the "shoot

em-down" "trap-em-like-vermin" attitude of 1913 and 1922 to the "sweet reasonableness" of the I.C. Act.

The new factor was the entry into the South African picture of the African worker as an organised force. Early in 1919 Clements Kadalie had started organising the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.) a general workers' union which spread like wildfire and soon claimed many thousands of members. Big strikes broke out in Cape Town, where 2,000 dockers came out, Port Elizabeth where 24 were killed and over a hundred wounded when police and armed Europeans opened fire on demonstrators, and, in February 1920, among African miners on the Rand. The I.C.U. stated before the Economic and Wage Commission in 1925 that it had over 30,000 members.

The authorities were seriously alarmed at this growth of African organisation and militancy. A magistrate, MacFie, well reflected the prevailing attitude towards the new spirit when sentencing African municipal workers, who had, under A.N.C. leadership, brought the sanitary department to a standstill in 1918.

"While in jail," he said, "they would have to do the same work as they had been doing . . . with an armed escort including a guard of Zulus armed with assegais and White men with guns. If they attempted to escape . . . they would be shot down. If they refused to obey orders they would receive lashes as often as might be necessary to make them understand that they had to do what they were told."

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\*During a strike of municipal workers in Johannesburg in 1919 a "Provisional Board of Control" was set up, consisting of equal numbers of workmen and City Councillors, and "ran the city" for a few days, until the Council came to its senses. A similar Board of Control took over Durban for one day in 1920.

If one nightmare haunted South Africa's imperialistic Randlords and slave driving farmers more than any other, it was the dread that the

militant White trade unions might join hands with the rising African movement against them.

## White Unions and Black Labour

It is true that, hitherto, the European unions had given little grounds for any such anxiety. To the immigrant craftsmen, mainly from Britain, who formed the early trade unions the African never appeared in the light of a fellow-worker. Traditional British insularity and lack of theoretical understanding, combined with the typical South African cleavage between skilled European and unskilled African to hide the underlying identity of basic interests between the white "aristocrat of labour" and "his boy." Moreover, to physical differences and differences of language, there were added in those days a difference of class outlook. For it is only in the last two or three decades that we have seen that vast integration of the African population into industry that has transformed hundreds of thousands of rural tribesmen and their descendants into a settled urban working community (a process the Nationalists are vainly trying to reverse.) Prior to the twenties most Africans working in the towns were peasants doing a casual and temporary job to earn a little hard cash before returning to the land.

As rural impoverishment and the vicious Land Act drove more and more Africans to the cities and the mines, economic pressures were also driving Afrikaners from the countryside into the mines and the industries — and into the trade unions — bringing with them the colour-prejudices of the slave-owning past.

Hence the white trade unions did not reach out to include Africans in their ranks, or even to assist their organisation into separate unions of their own. On the contrary, they often looked upon the African worker as a dangerous competitor who was able to offer labour at a rate far cheaper than their own. They adopted holus-bolus the vicious anti-African theories of the ruling classes, and sided with them against the young liberation movements of the Non-Europeans.\*

During the African strikes of 1918, the S.A. Industrial Federation, a trade union body headed by the notorious Archie Crawford, approached the Government and offered to raise "Labour Battalions" † for use "in case of a Native rising or rebellion." Nor should it be forgotten that the immediate cause of the 1922 strike itself was the threat of the Chamber to replace Europeans with cheap African labour. Despite the militancy of the strikers and the radical outlook of a section of the leadership, they never reached the level of allying themselves with the mine labourers, of helping them to organise, and thus forever ending the threat of "cheap labour." One of the slogans used in the strike — "Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa!" — reveals at once the socialistic leanings and the narrow limitations of the movement.

Yet, by the middle twenties, the picture had begun to change. The

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\*A notable exception was the support of the Transvaal Federation of Trade Unions for the general strike of Indians in Natal in 1913, which took place under the leadership of Gandhi and Gokhale against a £3 tax on former indentured labourers. The Federation expressed "sympathy with the Asiatics in their struggle" and asked "that no white man scab on them."

stormy events on the labour front had caused many workers to ponder deeply on the fundamental issues involved. The consistent preaching of the small band of internationalists within and outside the trade union movement, calling on workers to unite, irrespective of race, was making its mark. More and more the "yellow" leaders who preached reconciliation with the employers and hostility of colour, were being exposed and repudiated.

Following an "all-in" conference of trade unions at Cape Town to discuss the building of a broad trade union centre, and opposition to the anti-trade union measure (the Emergency Powers Bill) being proposed by the Minister of Labour, Creswell, the most representative gathering of trade unions South Africa had ever known met in Johannesburg on March 25, 1925, to establish the S.A. Association of Employees' Organisations — later known as the S.A. Trade Union Congress (1926), and later still as the S.A. Trades and Labour Council (1930). To the dismay of the

authorities and the reactionaries in the movement, the first man to be elected secretary of the new body was an outstanding advocate of unity between African and non-African workers — the late W. H. Andrews, a founder of the Communist Party of South Africa.

However, it would be wrong to deduce from this that the whole trade union movement had swung over to support his policy and viewpoint. He was known throughout the country as a veteran trade unionist of proved efficiency and ripe experience\*; an incorruptible workers' leader. His election was more a tribute to his personal qualities and an expression of disgust with his right-wing opponent (K. George, secretary of the Reduction Workers, who had supported Creswell's Bill) than a mark of agreement with his non-racial policy. In fact he failed to get the T.U.C. to agree to accept the affiliation of the I.C.U., — and disastrously for the trade union movement — he and his militant group of colleagues failed to carry a motion calling for the repeal of the Industrial Conciliation Act.

## The Path of "Conciliation"

It is true that the 1925 conference did adopt a resolution calling for the extension of the Act to cover Africans (the definition of "employee" excludes "pass-bearing Natives" and thereby withholds legal recognition from African unions). But it refused to reject the Act in principle; it accepted it as the framework within which the movement would operate, and in so doing set the pattern for the steady degeneration of trade union vigour and militancy.

The Industrial Conciliation Act is, as its name implies, an expression of the principle of class-collaboration. It provides for the establish-

ment of Industrial Councils, to be set up jointly by trade unions and employers' associations. These Councils provide a permanent machinery for the negotiation of agreements regarding wages, hours, conditions of employment and similar matters. Once negotiated and approved by the Minister of Labour, these agreements have the force of law. The Councils employ secretaries and clerical staff, as well as inspectors whose task is to see that the agreement is being observed and administered. In fact the Councils are an extension of the Department of Labour.

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\*Bill Andrews joined his trade union (the A.E.U.) in 1890.

There can be no doubt that the Act did offer tangible, indeed substantial, concessions to the Unions. Trade unions always seek to give their agreements with the employers the force of law, for obvious reasons. And by affording the Unions legal status and recognition the I.C. Act has stimulated organisation of workers in industries that were organised poorly, or not at all.

These advantages for a section of the workers have, however, been bought at a heavy price for the working class movement as a whole. The Act drastically restricts the right of unions to take strike action. Now, no worker "likes" strikes; they impose hardship and suffering. But long experience in all countries has shown that, deprived of the right to withhold their labour, or to threaten to do so, the workers inevitably find their standards and conditions deteriorating, for this is their only final argument when faced by intransigent employers.

The real weapon of the trade unionist when negotiating on behalf of the workers is their unity and solidarity, their readiness, if need be, to make sacrifices for the common cause.

But these basic lessons of trade unionism tended to be forgotten by the union official working within the confines of the I.C. Act, concentrating on the legal niceties of the wording of Agreements and constantly running to the Industrial Councils and the Labour Department.

Many Agreements negotiated under the Act provide for a compulsory closed shop, with Union dues deducted from the workers' pay-packets by the employers and handed over by cheque from the office. This "stop-order" system is, no doubt, a convenience to the Union organiser. It ensures the stability of a regular income for the organisa-

tion. At the same time, by relieving the union officials of the need constantly to visit the factories, to preach trade unionism to the workers, to win them for the union and to persuade them to pay their subs, the system tends to divorce the leaders from the rank and file. From trade union agitators and evangelists many become tame office hacks, looking for respectability, security and a pension, and dreading the storms and hazards of the class struggle.

Worst, perhaps, of all, despite the many formal T. & I.C. resolutions calling for the inclusion of Africans in the definition of "employee," the Act has made many registered trade unions parties to the gross exploitation of labour and the maintenance of the cheap labour system. White trade union representatives sit down with the employers and, in the absence of African delegates, solemnly negotiate "agreements" providing wages for African labourers, operatives, messengers and "boss-boys" which can barely sustain human life, and are a disgrace to all who sign them.

There have been, we may admirably say, honourable exceptions: European trade unionists who have battled tooth and nail for better wages for their absent comrades who are excluded from the conference table. But on the whole the pattern of the Act has made such behaviour difficult and remarkable. Even well-intentioned white union representatives faced during negotiations by hard-faced employers threatening to jettison a whole agreement unless wage claims for "labourers" are dropped, tend to place "their own" members first.

Other unions do not even pretend to care for the Africans. Their own members are safely entrenched in the higher-paid "privileged" occupations; as for the Africans who are rigidly restricted to unrewarding toil as "labourers" and "Grade C" opera-

tives," they are quite prepared to leave them to the mercy of the employers. The Agreement for the Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Industry is a good example of this sort of inhumanity. Entered into between 25 employers' associations and seven trade unions, it sets wages and conditions for many thousands of workers. The actual wage provisions are not surprising: there is the "normal" South African gulf between the rates for journeymen (3s. 9d. per hour) and labourers (7½d. per hour.) What is specially revolting about this Agreement is

that it is divided into two distinct sections, the first providing for conditions of work, the second providing "special conditions relating to certain classes of labour." The certain classes turn out to be those doing work paid at "Rates 8 to 12"—the lowest rates of pay. On further investigation it will be found that *precisely those working at these rates are Non-Europeans, mainly Africans.* The others are Europeans

Here are some examples:

## Extracts from 'Engineering Agreement'

### PART I (EUROPEANS)

### PART II (CERTAIN CLASSES)

#### HOLIDAYS

Three weeks paid holiday, *plus* 8% of year's pay *plus* £32.10 bonus.

Two weeks paid holiday. No bonus.

#### COST OF LIVING ALLOWANCES

A *special c.o.l.a.* on a sliding scale (at present about 50%.)

Ordinary minimum Government *c.o.l.a.*

#### OVERTIME

Time and a half for first six hours, thereafter double time.

Time and a third all through.

Similarly the motor industry agreement provides for weekly basic wage levels ranging from £11.10s. for journeymen down to £1 per week for "female labourers" (rising to £1.16s. after two years).

It will be noted that these glaring examples of discrimination occur in "heavy industry." The unions which are parties to these agreements might point out with some justification that the wage-pattern for such industries is set by the mines and the state-owned railways, where the scandalous wages and conditions for Africans are established by the employers without reference to the trade unions. These facts, however, do not excuse such glaring injustices as those in-

stanced above, nor the complete failure of the unions concerned, at any time, to reach out a helping hand towards the organisation of Africans in their industries to achieve better conditions for themselves.

*The fact of the matter is that trade unions of this type serve two functions: the normal one of defending their members against the greed of the employers, and the special "South African" one of preserving a monopoly of skilled and well-paid jobs for members of the white race.*

The I.C. Act strengthened them in this second function. From this point of view its acceptance by the

unions was in fact a dirty deal between them and the bosses at the expense of the Africans.

A rather different situation prevails in the numerous "secondary" industries, producing a wide variety of consumer and similar goods, which have sprung up very rapidly in South Africa over the last two or three decades, and especially during and since the last World War. Here, from the start, were factories built up largely on the employment of African, Coloured and Indian labour, affording — despite the formal exclusion of Africans dictated by the I.C. Act — the possibilities of building genuine multi-racial trade unions seeking the common good of all their members without favour or discrimination. And there have, to their everlasting credit, been trade unions which have grasped these opportunities firmly, building up organisations which have rejected the heresy of apartheid and which have trained their members in the spirit of unity and the brotherhood of man.

By no means all of the secondary industry unions can claim so proud a record. An unfortunate pattern was set in the clothing industry, where the former Union secretary, "Solly" Sachs, a dynamic and persuasive personality, combined a reputation for militant radicalism with a practical opportunism which has been the curse of his union. In the name of "realism" the racial prejudices of the Afrikaner workers were shamelessly pandered to. An all-white National Executive which, until their numerical preponderance in the industry forced concessions,

completely disenfranchised the Coloured workers in the conduct of Union affairs; strict apartheid in the Union offices; and the complete exclusion of Africans from the industrial agreement\* these were the results of the sacrifice of principle to expediency. Naturally, despite talk of "gradual education," such methods fortified rather than diminished colour prejudices. The Union has moved steadily to the Right, and no-one was really surprised when its proteges and leaders, the Misses Scheepers, Cornelius and Hartwell, joined forces with the Right at Durban to scuttle the T & L.C.

Thus the years of the I.C. Act, while they have witnessed a steady increase in the numerical membership and the financial resources of the trade union movement have also witnessed a steady degeneration in the nature of the unions. At the top an entrenched bureaucracy, forgetful of working class principles and traditions. A passive membership, looking to the officials to rectify their complaints in return for their dues and with little conception of the Union as their own organisation, demanding their unceasing loyalty and efforts. The whole body of the movement steadily undermined by the slow poison of racialism. Such were the fruits of "industrial conciliation." That was the price paid for the ruling class's pledges of permanent legal status and security. Now Ben Schoeman has repudiated the pledges; but have the "registered" unions, whose registration turns out after all to be an illusion, the will and vigour to fight back effectively?

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\*This was only changed this year, when the operation of the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act threatened widespread substitution of African labour, and the Agreement was accordingly extended to cover Africans.

The African trade union movement has failed to fulfill the bright promise of the early twenties. The I.C.U. steadily dwindled away to practically nothing. Various reasons have been advanced for this decline. The "all-in" form of "general workers" organisation, in which no single industry is ever adequately organised, has rarely proved successful. Bitter and open quarrels flared up among the I.C.U. leaders, and allegations of corruption were freely made. The end came when a Scottish "adviser" Mr. W. G. Ballinger, appeared, sent out apparently by the British Independent Labour Party. Both his Social-Democratic outlook and the routine British T.U.C. approach to organisation were utterly foreign and unsuitable to the movement. The militant Left was "purged" and the I.C.U. died a lingering death, amidst a babble of recriminations. At its height it had played a formidable role. General Hertzog (angling for the Cape African vote) once sent it a message of goodwill, and Walter Madeley brought about a Cabinet crisis, which ended in his being sacked as Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, when he agreed to meet an I.C.U. deputation.

## The African Unions

The early thirties saw a revival of efforts to build trade unions among African workers. With the assistance of the Communist Party, an African Federation of Trade Unions was formed, and many unions were started, some of which still survive. These efforts were not sponsored by the official trade union movement, though many of the more progressive trade unionists gave them their blessing and the benefit of their advice and experience.

The main strength of the new African movement lay in Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand. Feeling little sympathy or understanding

of their problems in the T. & L.C. it was natural that the African and other Non-European Unions should seek to come together in a co-ordinating council of their own. But here again personal differences and rivalries played their part, as well as the wrecking tactics of a group inspired by disruptive ideas similar to those of the present "Non-European Unity Movement." It was not until November 1941, when this group had largely been eliminated, that an all-in conference presided over by Mr. Moses Kotane (himself the product of the Johannesburg Trade Union movement) decided to come together in the Transvaal Council of Non-European Trade Unions. The new body included practically every African union in the Province.

At first, a large number of workers from many industries flocked into these trade unions, which conducted many gallant struggles on behalf of their members, not a few of which were successful.

During the second world war, the steady rise in the cost of living, together with a virtual Government ban on wage increases, placed an intolerable burden on the shoulders of the urban African working class. The African trade unions demanded a minimum wage of £3 per week for "unskilled" work. The employers resisted these demands, and though strikes were illegal under a "war measure" which is still in force, the workers decided in a number of industries that they had no real alternative to strike action. Coalyard and milling workers, milk deliverymen, even the underpaid semi-serfs employed by the municipality, downed tools and demanded more pay. Many Court prosecutions followed, and trade unionists were frequently victimised, but the determination of the workers had its effect and wages were in fact increased in certain industries.

## The 1946 Miners' Strike

The biggest industrial strike in the history of the African trade union movement took place in August, 1946, when tens of thousands of compounded slaves of the Chamber of Mines, after repeated representations by their Union had been completely ignored by the Chamber, stopped work in support of their demand for a minimum wage of ten shillings a day. The Smuts Government set up a special sub-committee of Cabinet Ministers to deal with the situation. Their method of "dealing with it" was barbarous and ruthless in the extreme. Thousands of police were drafted to the Witwatersrand, where they batoned, bayoneted and machine-gunned the miners, killing and wounding hundreds until they were ready to go back to work. The miners of each mine, isolated and confined to their compounds, were subjected to intense lying propaganda, telling them all the others had gone back. The president of the union, Mr. J. B. Marks was arrested, together with other officials and organisers, and the organisation of the Union — very shaky at its best — was completely disrupted. Apart from Union leaflets circulated surreptitiously in the compounds, communication between the men of different mines was non-existent.

Despite the reign of terror unleashed against them and their Union, the miners stood firm for a week before they yielded to overwhelming force. They returned to work without realising their demands.

But, as in the case of 1922, the 1946 strike had profound repercussions and consequences. It began a process which, eight years later, is far from completed.

The miners' strike of 1946 was one of those great social events which at once illuminate and accelerate history: brilliantly showing up and hastening the main conflicts which determine social development, pitilessly exposing the hypocrisy, cowardice or futility of those who seek to evade those conflicts and stand on the sidelines. The strike destroyed, once and for all, the myth of the State as a "neutral" body, standing above the conflict between employer and employed, rich and poor. It spelt the end of the compromising, concession-begging tendencies which had hitherto dominated African politics, and which found their expression in such a body as the Natives' Representative Council\*. Left wing political leaders who had expressed their support for the African miners were arrested and the leadership of the former Communist Party was charged in a series of abortive "treason and sedition" trials — this marked the opening of a phase of intense ruling-class repression of the Left which has continued with increased venom to this day. The courage and class-consciousness of the miners inspired and awakened tens of thousands of oppressed African workers: the miners of '46 were the forerunners of the protest strikers of May Day and the 26th of June, the defiance volunteers, the brave men and women who have stood by the Congress movement through the grim days of Nationalist repression.

At the same time the strike revealed perilous weaknesses in the trade union movement itself. The Trades and Labour Council did not lift a finger to help the strikers. The joint mining unions privately conveyed to the Chamber their readiness to scab. The T. & L.C.

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\*The N.R.C. adjourned indefinitely during the strike, as a mark of protest against the brutal treatment of the strikers. It never met again.

leaders sent a scandalous telegram to the World Federation of Trade Unions, to which it was then affiliated, stating that "the Natives were misled by irresponsible people," and that the police action was "drastic but warranted." This cable led to a storm among the affiliated unions, but it was never repudiated or withdrawn.

The Council of Non-European Trade Unions unhesitatingly decided in favour of full support for the striking miners. On "Bloody Tuesday" (August 12) when police opened fire and killed a number of strikers, a general meeting of affiliated unions decided to call a general strike in Johannesburg as a mark of protest and solidarity. Though some workers in a few industries heeded the call, the strike failed to materialise. This was only partly due to police action in banning all meetings called to inform the workers of the decision. The fact was that the Union leaders lacked the mass support and the contact with the workers in their work places to translate their decision into practice.

These organisational weaknesses, which still persist, do not only arise out of the difficulties which stand in the way of African trade union organisation. There can be no doubt of the formidable nature of these difficulties. When Miss Johanna Cornelius taunted the African unions with "coming to us cap in hand and asking other workers to fight their battles;" when, at the "funeral" conference of the T. & L.C., she said "the African workers are the easiest workers in South Africa to organise," she was talking with the voice of one who has forgotten, or chooses to forget, what sort of a country we are living in.

Short of legislation actually declaring them illegal, African union organisers have to contend with every conceivable sort of obstacle. Reactionary employers refuse them

access to the factories and prosecute them for trespass. The Labour Department declines to prosecute employers who break the law when the complainant is an African union — so do the police and the public prosecutors. All the resources of the State, the employers, and even the registered unions are mobilised against them. The Minister of Labour has introduced a law\* deliberately designed, in his own words, "to bleed the Native trade unions to death."

Yet, as pointed out by Mr. Moses Kotane, in his brilliant survey "South Africa's Way Forward," published in May this year, the weakness of the African trade unions does not arise only out of such obstacles. Paying tribute to "the unwearying efforts of those trade unionists who for many years have battled to keep their organisations going in the face of hostility of the employers and the Government, and even, in many cases, of the registered trade unions," he faces the "blunt fact" that these efforts have not resulted to any great extent in building "big, stable and effective" bodies. He continues:

"This comparative failure is not only due to the objective difficulties . . . . It is also due to a mistaken approach . . . which aims at unions identical in character to those recognised under the Industrial Conciliation Act.

"It is vain . . . for African organisations to seek for their strength in elaborate office routines and administrative machinery. Their strength lies, and can only lie, in the building of militant rank and file bodies, with active committees ceaselessly attending to daily complaints in every factory and workshop; sustained . . . by the consciousness, unity and determination of the workers themselves."

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\*The Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, 1953.

Here Mr. Kotane has put his finger on the central lesson which must be mastered if the Schoeman "company union" plan is to be defeated and the survival of the unions assured. To a great many workers, the "union" appears to consist of the organiser or secretary who comes round on a Friday afternoon to collect subscriptions. They tend to look on him as a sort of lawyer or intermediary who offers to get their grievances and complaints rectified in return for their subs. And they have little confidence that he can fulfill this function. During the war years there were not a few careerists and racketeers who posed as "trade unionists" and lined their pockets by trading on the sufferings and hardships of the workers: subsequently disappearing with the money. Such incidents did great harm to the whole movement. They could only occur because of the fatal misconception that has developed concerning the nature and function of a trade union.

That conception must be eliminated root and branch before any substantial progress can be made. The union consists of the workers organised at their places of work. They are represented in their factories by their trade union shop committees, and throughout the industry by their elected trade union leaders. They may or may not be able to open an office or appoint paid servants of the union. But these things do not make a union. There can be a union without full-time personnel. There can be no trade union without the active participation of the workers of the industry.

Does this mean that the workers should be content merely to organise in individual factories, and give up the idea of industry-wide organisation? Certainly not. Major questions like wages and hours of work can only be tackled properly on a nation-wide scale throughout the industry. The idea of isolating

the workers in each factory to deal only with "their own" employer is the idea of the Schoeman law, with which only renegades from trade unionism would collaborate. The basic principle of the movement is to unite the workers in each industry or trade; to unite the trade unions of all industries in a single federation. To unite, indeed, the trade unionists of all the world.

Not does it mean that professional trade unionists are not valuable and necessary. *Once the workers are organised on a sound rank-and-file basis*, full-time leaders, devoting their whole energies and attention to the movement, supported by the workers' contributions and thus not dependent on a boss for a livelihood, are essential to the growth and development of the unions.

Once this lesson has been mastered and brought home by practical example at the point of production, neither Schoeman's vicious law nor the opposition of the employers can prevent the mass development of the movement.

## Under Nationalist Regime

Notwithstanding its handicaps and deficiencies, the African trade union movement has enhanced its stature during the bitter years of the Nationalist regime. More and more, as the Trades and Labour Council retreated from one position after another, the Council of Non-European trade Unions has come forward as the true spokesman of the workers' interests, irrespective of race or colour. The C.N.E.T.U. reacted vigorously to the challenge of the Schoeman "Native Labour" law, calling special conferences, issuing explanatory leaflets, and organising factory meetings to explain to the workers the real meaning of the N.A.D. "Native Labour Board." When the T. & L.C. timidly withdrew from the World Federation of Trade Unions, it was the Non-European Council which kept aloft the South African labour tradition of maintaining fraternal bonds with

the workers abroad.

In contrast, the European trade unions have, on the whole, sadly failed in their function of maintaining the people's rights and the workers' standard under the most reactionary, anti-labour Government this country has ever known.

Indeed, that the Government ever did come to office, is partly to be ascribed to long-continued failure by the union leaders to educate the workers in the principles of the movement. The Nationalists have long been notorious for their hostility to trade unionism. For years, subsidised by the notorious £10,000 "Marais Fund,"\* Nationalist agents have been steadily undermining the unions, establishing splinter "white" groups, slandering and attacking union leaders. They managed to capture the wealthy Mineworkers' Union. They established themselves in Pretoria, and got the local committee of the T. & L.C. there to break away from head office to form the anti-Non-European "Ko-ordineerende Raad van Vakunies" in that town. They are at work in the Garment union (where they have captured the Germiston branch) and in the building, leather, furniture and other industries.

Yet the dominant, right-wing trade union leadership has made no real effort to mobilise the workers against these bitter enemies of labour, following rather a policy of continual retreat and appeasement.

At the time of the introduction of the infamous "Suppression of Communism" Act, the Trades and Labour Council was able to see quite clearly that this pernicious law placed the whole future of the trade union movement in jeopardy. It

protested and even called a public meeting in the Johannesburg City Hall. But, true to form, the National Executive Committee studiously stood aside from the mass Non-European protests organised against the Bill. It failed to respond to the appeal of the African National Congress to attend an emergency conference to discuss the measure and to plan mass action against it. It played no part in the national day of protest on June 26, 1950.

All these, and many other failures reflected the disastrous slogan "no politics in the trade unions" which became the stock answer of the T. & L.C. leadership to rank and file demands for a stand to be taken on political matters.

It is true, of course, that trade unions are, and should remain bodies open to all workers, irrespective of their affiliations and beliefs. But to draw from this the conclusion that trade unions can or should stand aside from participation in the public affairs of the day, on matters which vitally affect the interests of the workers, is nothing but treachery and surrender to the ruling class. The employers, organised as the State, are continually, daily, attacking the rights and living standards of the masses of the people. Unless the organised labour movement resists these attacks, on the political as well as on the industrial front, and advances the general demands of the working class, that movement will perish.

The warnings made when Swart introduced the Suppression Act have been amply fulfilled. Dozens of leading figures have been banned

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\*A legacy left by a wealthy widow for the purpose of "combatting un-Afrikaans tendencies in the trade unions."

and driven out of their trade unions by the Government, including Issy Wolfson, the former Treasurer, Solly Sachs, Piet Huyser, Eli Weinberg, Willie Kalk, Ray Alexander, all of them familiar personalities in the T. & L.C., as well as the former President, J. B. Marks, the Secretary, Dan Tloome, of the C.N.E.T.U., George Maeka, M. P. Naicker, S. V. Reddy, G. Tshume and many other Non-European workers' leaders. And even as I write the process goes on, with unions such as the Textile, the Food and Canning and others robbed of almost their entire leadership, hit by ban after ban.

In a few cases, workers themselves in the various unions concerned took direct action against these outrageous actions, striking for a day or more in protest. The T. & L.C. protested, sent telegrams and deputations to an unmoved Minister. But in no case has the organised trade union movement

proved able or willing to take these issues to the rank and file in a militant manner, to prepare them for working class action on a national scale in a manner which would halt the piecemeal destruction of the movement which is taking place before their eyes.

Indeed, there is evidence that some of the leaders were worried less by the threat to the movement and the fate of their comrades than by what might happen to themselves personally. The lowest point was reached when a committee representing some of the most opportunist leaders proposed that a trade union sub-committee should "advise" Swart and Schoeman before they banned trade unionists, thus collaborating in the administration of the Suppression Act to see that no "good boys" should accidentally get banned. The proposal came to nothing, after a storm of protest, but the incident illustrated the rot that had set in.

## The Year 1954

The year 1954 saw all these tendencies come to a head. In March, Morris Kagan, one of the few of the older militants who remained, resigned from the National Executive of the T. & L.C., alleging that the N.E.C. was planning a deal with the Federationites in which the T. & L.C. would be dissolved and merged into a new body which would exclude African unions. He would not, he said, be a party to such a betrayal of principles.

Later the same month, in his presidential address to the annual conference of the C.N.E.T.U., Mr. George Maeka gave a penetrating review of the situation. Schoeman's Industrial Conciliation Act Amendment Bill, he said, was the "second instalment" of the general anti-Labour programme. The first instalment was the Native Labour Act, which had not been seriously challenged by the white trade unionists

who imagined it did not affect them. The Africans must not make the same mistake about the present Bill. They must fight both. "An injury to one is an injury to all," he said. He bitterly attacked the Unity Committee for excluding the African unions from its so-called all-in conference against the Bill.

"You agree to exclude the Africans in order to get the racialists and nationalists to come to your conference. But if they come they will come not to fight the Government but to sabotage the struggle against the Schoeman laws."

Mr. Maeka announced that his Council had decided it could not remain passive in the face of the threat to the movement. It would itself convene an all-in non-racial trade union conference, to consider the whole future of the movement as well as the anti-labour laws.

"We have always been and still are in favour of a single united trade union centre for South Africa, built on the basis of equality and non-discrimination," he said.

That conference did take place at Cape Town, followed by the two exclusively non-African "unity conferences," at which (echoes of 1925!) it was decided *not* to reject the Schoeman Bill "in principle," but to oppose specific clauses of it. And then came the closing conference of the Trades and Labour Council (so brilliantly reported by Mrs. Jackie Arenstein in *Advance*) in which its right-wing leaders, assuming the role of undertakers, unceremoniously interred the remains of the body which, for all its defects, had so long proclaimed the right of all organised workers to enter its portals.

The leaders of the textile, food and canning, distributive, laundry and a number of other unions, stood loyally by their principles. McCormick and other admirers of Mr. Schoeman\*, they protested, had deserted the Council but recently over the very issue of their demand for the exclusion of Africans. This was a backdoor method of surrendering to their demand, and to the Government's policy of apartheid. To all these bitter protests, Carl Rehm, Dulcie Hartwell, Jessie McPherson, Bennie Weinbrenn and others, many of whom must have realised how impermissible their arguments in fact were, had but one reply. Principle had to be sacrificed to achieve a united organisation. It was a steep price; but they were prepared to pay it. In the end, intrigues and lobbying produced the necessary two-thirds majority, and the Council was dissolved. Within a month it emerged that Mr. McCormick's Federation would not be merged

with the new Trade Union Council after all, but would remain in splendid isolation. The "steep price" had been paid for nothing. Once again the workers had not been "sold" — they had been given away for nothing.

But the traditions of the heroic pioneers and heroes of labour are far from being dead and buried in South Africa. The trade union and working class movement is the inevitable product of large-scale industry in a class-divided society. Like a mighty river flowing to the sea, it must ever rise and triumph over the tyrants and the oppressors who seek to destroy it, the cowards who flinch and the traitors who sneer.

Immediately after the Durban conference, most of the unions which had so gallantly fought against dissolution came together in a provisional committee pledged to form a new, non-racial national federation of South African trade unions. It is planning soon to convene a national conference for this purpose, and as I write I learn the splendid news that the Council of Non-European Trade Unions has decided to join them in this effort, and to throw its weight behind the new body.

The new federation, whatever its name will be, will be the true heirs to the great fighting traditions of the labour movement, of Bill Andrews, Albert Nzula and Clements Kadalié. It will carry forward the banner that has been abandoned by the T & L.C.

But it should by no means aim at duplicating the former Trades and Labour Council. The years that have gone past have taught many rich lessons, and as I hope I have shown in this article, have revealed pitfalls which must be avoided in the

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\*"Mr. McCormick said that . . . the Minister of Labour, Mr. Schoeman, was not only amenable to reason, but fully realised the benefits of a well-organised trade union movement." (Reported in "The Star," March 24, 1951.)

future. Let me try, in conclusion, to summarise some of these lessons.

Firstly, the new Federation should from the start reflect in its leadership at every level and in its policy the composition of the South African working class. In particular it should adequately represent the most exploited, most militant and forward-looking section: the African workers.

Secondly, the progressive trade union movement must once and for all turn its back on the chief obstacle to workers' unity, the ruling class's most potent weapon against trade unionism: the industrial colour bar. To both the Nationalists and the United Party\* the chief function of a trade union is to maintain a racial monopoly of jobs. The trade union movement must, instead, while preserving the rate for the job, deliberately set itself to destroy that monopoly.

Thirdly, the movement must rely on its own strength and constant vigilance, not upon the "goodwill" of the employers or the "security" of the capitalist State and its laws. It must constantly fight against bureaucratic tendencies and maintain and renew democratic contact between the leadership and the rank and file. An agreement, and the industrial council which administers it, are merely formal reflections of the real balance of forces. They are instruments which can be used to help or destroy the unions. Unions must aim not merely at "legal" recognition, but the real recognition which their own strength

forces upon the employers and their Government.

Fourthly, the trade union movement will fail unless it identifies itself fully and actively with the real struggles of the workers in all spheres of their life, not only for better wages and conditions of work, but also against the pass laws and the apartheid measures which keep them poor, against the bad housing and transport which they suffer. And, consigning the bad slogan "no politics" to the rubbish heap where it belongs, the unions should boldly come forward to advance the demands which are near and dear to the heart of every worker, for democracy, for land, for liberty! Only thus, in partnership with the great movements for national liberation of the Non-White people, can the trade union movement arise to play its rightful part in the emancipation of our land.

Finally, and of the utmost importance, it must be the function of the new federation to reach out and win the hundreds of thousands, nay, the millions of unorganised workers of town and country into the fold of the trade union movement. Thus far, trade unionism has but touched the fringe of the working population. It awaits bold imaginative campaigning, ceaseless evangelising, the work of hundreds and thousands of volunteers, assisted and encouraged, too, by the Congresses and other democratic movements, to bring the message of unity and union organisation to the workers and serfs of town and village, mine and farm.

—Johannesburg, November, 1954.

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\*The workers, through their trade unions, and the management of industry should administer the industrial colour bar through the machinery of collective bargaining."—Mr. Strauss at the United Party Conference, November 16, 1954.