Not even Mr. Erasmus would seriously contest the fact that the Union is practically defenceless against atomic attack.

We must do something about it, and urgently too.

Mr. Cecil Williams and the fifty-odd prominent theatre and radio personalities who wrote to Mr. Strijdom asking him to use his influence "to bring about an immediate cessation of these tests" in defence of "not only our lives but the culture we hold dear" — these have shown us the way.

We must speak out! Our scientists and our educationists must follow the path charted by Dr. Schweitzer and so many others, and follow the example of the artists headed by Mr. Williams. And our women's and cultural organisations, our political and trade union leaders, our writers, our lawyers, our workers and farmers.

"Insight, seriousness, courage." Those are the qualities which Dr. Schweitzer correctly called for at this grave time. Let it not be said that our people were wanting in those qualities when every human achievement and aspiration was in peril.

AFRICAN WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS

by BEN TUROK, M.P.C.,

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The new Industrial Conciliation Act, which came into operation at the beginning of 1957, despite the opposition of trade unions and employers alike, has led to a great deal of discussion of basic policy in the trade union movement. There has been a process of soul-searching, reassessment of past policies and attempts to find a way out for the future, and this process is still continuing. This discussion will not be fruitful unless it takes into account the importance of the largest group of workers, the Africans, in relation to the trade union movement as a whole.

This discussion should also take into account the powerful tendency to organisation and trade union action arising out of the sharp decline of real wages over the past decade, with the very real poverty and distress that this has caused, particularly among the lowest-paid section.*

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* Miss Olive Gibson, in her recent detailed study "The Cost of Living for Africans", points out that there has been a "grave deterioration in conditions for Africans." In his recent book on the African workers, Mr. Alex Hepple, M.P. confirms this opinion. He says, "Taking wages and cost-of-living allowance together, and taking account of the small rise in wages granted to them in 1942, unskilled workers are receiving less real wages than they did before the war."

These are factors behind the recent bus boycotts, which have led to acknowledgements by Chambers of Commerce and other bodies that African wages are too low, and are reflected in the mass campaign launched by the Congress of Trade Unions, in conjunction with the African National Congress and other progressive organisations, for immediately wage-increases all round, a national minimum wage of £1 a day, and the recruitment of 20,000 unorganised workers into trade unions.

African workers in the towns, as can be seen from the defiance campaign, the Congress of the People, the bus boycotts, the day of protest on June 26th and many other struggles, have emerged as a force to be reckoned with, showing a high degree of unity and political consciousness.

Yet this advance has not been reflected in a corresponding growth, so far, of African trade unions. Compared with the total number of Africans engaged in industry* the number who are members of trade unions, about 30,000 is discouragingly small.

Why has trade unionism not taken deep root among the African workers? Why are the African unions weak? There are objective reasons for this, beyond the immediate control of the trade union movement.

Migratory labour is one of the major drawbacks to trade union organisation. Workers who are continually moving to and fro between the towns and the reserves are difficult to organise. In many factories there is a complete turnover of trade union members every few years, and migrant workers often do not return to the same factory or even the same town after a spell of farming. Many workers who do live permanently in the towns nevertheless have links with the countryside and support families in the reserves.

Nevertheless, there is a steady growth of a stable labour force in the town industries. Professor J. L. Sadie has estimated that 65 per cent. of the 2¼ million urban Africans are settled permanently in the towns.

Another factor holding back trade unionism among Africans is that they are restricted mostly to unskilled work. Skilled workers everywhere find it easier to organise successfully. They are in a better bargaining position in relation to the employers, who find it difficult to replace them. That is why trade unionism began, in England and other countries, with the craftsmen. Yet semi-skilled and unskilled workers have flooded into the trade union movement everywhere. The so-called "unskilled worker" is not really so lacking in skill or so easy to replace as employers try to make out; for the "labourer" in any industry is required to and does acquire a high degree of facility at his work and no employer would care to face the grim prospect of replacing his entire African staff overnight.

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* The number given by the Industrial Legislation Commission for 1948 is 232,502 excluding mine-workers. (Southern Transvaal: 164,802; Western Cape: 22,768; Port Elizabeth: 10,670; Durban and Pinetown: 34,262). A more recent figure (1950) is given by Miss Muriel Howell, "South Africa's Non-White Workers," as being 368,802 African workers in industry excluding mines.

Trade unionism is not spontaneous. It is true that disputes often arise at work places, in the course of which the workers take united action, but such actions do not of themselves automatically lead to the establishment of permanent stable organisations of the trade union type, which require conscious effort.

Such conscious efforts to organise African workers have been made from time to time, though far too little on the part of the organised non-African trade unions. Their comparative lack of success, and the consequent lack of a trade union tradition and consciousness among African workers today, is due not merely to the type of difficulty mentioned above, or to the fact — referred to by Mr. Alex Hepple in his "The African Worker in South Africa," — that Africans are "relative newcomers to commerce and industry." In fact, already in 1925 Africans made up 46 per cent. of the labour force in manufacture, and today South Africa stands twelfth in the world in the degree of industrialisation in proportion to the population.

In fact the principal difficulties in the way of development of a big trade union movement and tradition among Africans are those deliberately imposed for many years by the industrial legislation of the country.

Trade unions always strive to attain legal recognition and status, for the history of the movement has shown that they flourish under such conditions. Lack of recognition hampers their growth.

Trade union recognition came to South Africa, after bitter struggles, in 1924, with the passing of the first Industrial Conciliation Act. Unions could be registered under this Act, thus securing their legal status. But from the inception Africans were excluded from its benefits, and were thus left out of the general development of the registered trade union movement. As a result they were unable to take part in collective bargaining. The conclusion of an industrial agreement laying down rates of pay and conditions of work has had little meaning for a section of the workers who were never, either directly or through their representatives, consulted or even told what was going on until the agreement was reached. How important this has been in preventing the development of union-consciousness among Africans may be seen, for example, by comparing the position of Coloured workers in the Cape, whose trade union tradition is a valuable part of the heritage of their people.

African trade unions are not illegal. Even strikes are legal under certain circumstances. But, as pointed out by Mr. Hepple in the book cited above, "Although the neglect of White trade unionists has been responsible in some measure for the slow progress of unionism among Africans, Government restriction and employers' hostility have been the main handcaps."

Union Governments, whether S.A.P., Coalition, or United Party were never sympathetic to African unions, and the present Nationalist Government is openly hostile. The Minister of Labour (then Mr. Schoeman) himself stated, in introducing the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act, that its purpose was to "bleed these unions to death." Without actu-

ally declaring African Unions illegal, the impression of illegality has been fostered by the Labour Department and the Native Affairs Department in every possible way, both among employers and workers. Many Africans are not aware that they have the right to form unions, even if these are unregistered and unrecognised. Strikes frequently take place of African workers — there were 33 in 1954 and 72 in 1955 — but these are seldom consolidated in the form of established workers' organisations.

There is a great deal of scope for open and legal trade unionism among African workers, even within the framework of the present unjust laws; but the workers themselves are not sufficiently acquainted with these possibilities.

Anti-African prejudice has combined with the operation of the Industrial Conciliation Act to keep Africans out of trade unions formed by workers of other racial groups. At one time, to their credit, despite the provisions of the Act, many registered Unions went out to recruit African members. But in 1945 the Labour Department threatened that any Union which included African workers would lose its registration. As a result Africans in the furniture, sweet and other industries were excluded and have remained unorganised ever since. In other industries, such as food and canning, textile and laundry, parallel African unions were established which worked in harmony with the registered organisations.

Looking back, one may well ask whether the unions should not have refused in 1945 to expel the African members and taken a stand for unity rather than let the Government divide the workers on racial lines. Although one may leave that question to be debated by trade unionists with more knowledge of conditions in those days, there can be no doubt that the spinelessness of the registered unions on the racial question for many years cost the movement dear when it led to the unions' pitiful inability to prevent the enactment of the shocking new I.C. Act by the present Government.

It is true that the former Trades and Labour Council repeatedly pronounced in favour of the amendment of the definition of "employee" in the old Act to include Africans. Resolution after resolution to this effect was taken by annual T. & L.C. Conferences, but never followed by effective action or campaigning, even during the war period when Madeley was in office as Minister of Labour, and the workers were in an exceptionally strong position generally to press important claims.

As a result of the exclusion of Africans from the registered unions, and hence from the negotiation of agreements, most registered unions pay little attention to their needs and demands. There is an ever-growing gap between the wages of "skilled" and "unskilled." Africans cannot be expected to take any interest in such negotiations.

Under the I.C. Act, a closely-knit relationship has developed between the registered unions, the employers and the Labour Department. So much so that many Africans think that the trade unions are part of the state machinery, from which they, as oppressed people, are excluded. They

speak of "Government unions." When I have asked African workers who are about to join our Union who they think is responsible for paying the office rent, I have frequently had the reply — "the Government!"

Even in the industries I have referred to where parallel unions of African workers work in close co-operation with registered unions, the situation leaves much to be desired. True, a measure of unity has undoubtedly been achieved; joint strikes and other struggles have taken place, and these unions stand in the forefront of the present trade union movement. But there is some doubt in my mind whether this type of unity is really the answer to our problems. The administrative separation enforced by the Labour Department, the division of funds — so important a question in the unions — and especially the exclusion of the African unions from Industrial Councils and other media of negotiation with the employers: all these factors serve to reinforce colour barriers and undermine true trade union unity.

Especially when new unions are being built up, in the crucial early months of organisation, the slender resources of leadership are critically strained by the need to provide separate committees for parallel unions. It is at this time, too, that it important to weld the emerging leadership closely together on sound trade union principles. This cannot be achieved by parallelism.

The I.C. Act, and its acceptance by the trade union movement, has not only hamstrung the development of the African workers as trade unionists; it has had a fatally weakening effect on the trade union movement as a whole. Not only has it had the crippling result of excluding what is numerically the largest group of potential trade union members, it has also deprived the leadership of the movement of the participation of what has shown itself to be the most politically developed and conscious section of the working class. Is it any wonder the trade union movement is so backward?

Looking back on the past, many trade unionists must be asking themselves whether the acceptance of registration under the old I.C. Act was not a mistake. Was it not this acceptance, with its consequent exclusion of tens of thousands of potential union members, which has led to the weakness, ineffectiveness and lack of principle of the movement of today in the face of the Nationalist attacks on the workers' rights?

No doubt, in 1924 many trade unionists were conscious of these great disadvantages of registration, but weighed them against the immediate benefits of legal protection for their members.

Today under the new I.C. Act, with its many additional and grave restrictions on trade union freedom, the problem presents itself anew. The protection afforded by the new Act is so little; the price of registration is so great, including not only severance of the African workers, but also dismemberment of unions into separate European and Coloured or Indian fragments, that more and more union members are beginning to ask: "Is it worth it?"

Moreover, it is becoming increasingly recognised that the African workers themselves are a force to be reckoned with. Despite their present

lack of trade union organisation, they have in the course of the bus boycotts and other struggles shown a sense of solidarity and discipline that many long-established trade unions could not hope to emulate.

In the circumstances, it seems to me that the time has come that the South African trade union movement should turn its back on the barren and disastrous experiment of apartheid which it has practiced during its past 60 years of battling in the wilderness. It should return to the well tried and proven path of industrial organisation of all workers, irrespective of colour, which is the only standard of trade unionism known or acceptable to the great world beyond the borders of Southern Africa.

Genuine, multi-racial industrial unions, affording equal democratic rights to all members, will of course not qualify for registration in terms of the Schoeman-de Klerk Industrial Conciliation Act. So much the worse for the Act, we should say. The Act should be made for the Unions, not the Unions made to fit the Act! And if the unions at present registered should decide to boycott the Act, it would become a useless dead letter — just as the Schoeman Native Labour Act has been killed stone dead by the virtual boycott of it on the part of the African workers.

The most convincing argument to persuade the registered unions of the truth of these arguments and to get them to throw away the useless crutch of registration would be the effective organisation of tens of thousands of African workers into trade unions now.

Looked at from this approach, the mass organising drive of the S.A. Congress of Trade Unions, behind the slogans of all round wage increases and a national minimum of £1 a day, can prove crucial for the whole future of trade unionism.

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