

## MAIN TOPIC

DISA/Aluka Topic #225: Trade Unions and Resistance—Labor Struggles of the 1950s

**Links** should also be made to the following topic

DISA/Aluka Topic #336: SA Communist Party—Party and Trade Unions, contested accounts

**IP rights:** Both interviewer and interviewee are deceased. This is a cleaned-up and edited version of the transcript which appears in the Karis-Carter microfilms made by CAMP. The original transcript is in the Northwestern University library as part of the Melville J. Herskovits Africana collection, but Gerhart acquired a copy from Karis before the material went to Northwestern.

---

---

## Alexander Hepple

*Alexander Hepple (1904-1983), politician and author, was a member of the South African parliament for the white socialist Labour Party from 1948 to 1958, and edited its newspaper "Forward". He chaired the Treason Trial Defence Fund (1956-1961), and later ran the International Defence and Aid Fund information service in London. He was the author of a biography of Hendrik Verwoerd (1967) and of **South Africa: a Political and Economic History** (1966). He was interviewed in Johannesburg on February 28, 1964, by Professor Gwendolen M. Carter of Smith College, USA, and Sheridan [Dan] Johns, a graduate student at Harvard University.*

**GMC: Mr. Hepple, could you tell us a little about the origins of SACTU?**

Yes. the South African Congress of Trade Unions was a federation of trade unions, mostly nonwhite unions, which came into existence about 1956. The background to its birth must be traced back to the old trade union federation called the Trades and Labour Council. The Trades and Labour Council was the only federation of unions of any significance in South Africa prior to the War and during the war years, and in the few years subsequent to that.

But in those years there had been rumblings of a division and strong differences of opinion on the admission of nonwhites to the trade union movement. The old Trades and Labour Council had several nonwhite trade unions and this association with nonwhite trade unions was not exactly on a basis of full equality although there was nothing in the constitution or in the administration of the Trades and Labour Council that indicated racial discrimination. But there was the feeling among a large number of the nonwhite trade unions that they were second class members. But in spite of that, the main leadership of the Trades and Labour Council—or should I amplify that and say a number of the stronger unions affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council—were very anxious to bring all the nonwhite workers under its umbrella.

Then in 1954 the government brought in its bill to amend the Industrial Conciliation Act and to enforce apartheid on the trade unions. Just prior to this and at this time there were a number of pro-government unions, the majority of whom were Afrikaners who were rebelling in the Trades and Labour Council. They said that the Trades and Labour Council was overrun by Communists and nonwhites, and they said that unless there was a reformation in the Trades and Labour Council, they would secede. This they in fact did. I am not quite sure of the year but it was about this time.

Then the government took two years before it finally put this bill through Parliament. In those two years there was activity on the trade union front and a movement arose which was described as a unity movement—a movement to unite the trade unions to protect their interests. All the unions affiliated to the Trades and Labour Council were invited and other unions who belonged to no federation were invited to join together to put up the strongest possible front to resist the government's moves to interfere with the trade unions.

**GMC: Who was behind this? Who took the initiative in trying to organise this united front?**

Several unions belonging to the Trades and Labour Council. At the time the president of the Trades and Labour Council was Tommy Rutherford, the Secretary of the SA Typographical Union.

**GMC: Was he a moving figure in this?**

Well, he was only one, there were several others. This culminated in a conference in Cape Town. I attended that conference. There was a parliamentary session on at that time, and it had several proposals before it. But this conference, although it was organised to establish unity to oppose the Industrial Conciliation Bill, neither succeeded in achieving this unity nor did it make any move whatsoever to resist this bill.

**GMC: Was it held at the same time that the bill was going through Parliament?**

Yes, it was. This conference was held in Cape Town during the session in 1956 when Parliament was debating the final draft of the bill. It was held not far from the Houses of Parliament.

**GMC: Were any nonwhite unions represented at the conference?**

Yes, some were represented at the conference. And finally it was decided to establish the Trade Union Council which is now known as the Trade Union Council of SA (TUCSA). This was the largest federation. It was originally named the SA Trade Union Council, and in more recent years it had been changed to Trade Union Council of SA because of this confusion with SACTU. They appointed a delegation to discuss the bill with the minister of labour but they gave the minister assurances that there was no intention on the part of the trade unions to flout the law or to create difficulties, but they were quite— They impressed upon the minister that there was no need for a lot of the compulsory apartheid clauses that were included in the bill.

Before I go on to the bill I must complete my comments on the conference. A number of the delegates to that conference were very dissatisfied with the way the conference went. They said, they alleged, that the leading figures were trying to avoid facing up to the real issue and that was complete nonracial unity.

**DJ: Who were these dissident leaders?**

I'll come on to that. They complained that there was no possibility of fighting the bill unless there was a full united front. Now the reply that soon came back—it was not clearly expressed or stated at the

conference, but it was expressed and stated very clearly to me by delegates and then it did come into the record later, I understand—was this. The belief among the numerically strongest unions was this: that there was never any hope of getting complete unity and it was preferable to get the unity of the maximum that they could preserve, rather than the unity that would be on the same shaking foundations as the old Trades and Labour Council. With this point in mind they formed the Trade Union Council of SA and in order to make it attractive to the right wing unions who were opposed to nonwhite, or to African, affiliation, their constitution provided that affiliation to the TUCSA was open to all unions excepting African unions and those open to Africans as members. So their first constitution specifically excluded Africans but not other nonwhites.

**GMC: The coloureds and Indians.**

That's right. I have not got the names available but I can get them for you of the dissident group. Most of the dissident group were the nonwhite unions and those that were strongly attached to the African unions.

**DJ: They tended to be the smaller unions?**

Yes. One of the unions was the Distributive Workers—the National Union of Distributive Workers—they were the strong one, but their story comes later. They never went into SACTU. But all the other unions tended to be the smaller unions. All the African unions and a number of the nonwhite unions and some of those that were generally known to be strong left-wing sympathisers. They met and the other group met and they decided after some discussion that the only thing they could do was to revive the old Trades and Labour Council as the true federation. That came to nothing because it was a registered organisation, so then they decided to form a separate organisation and that is how SACTU came into being. They formed a separate organisation.

And SACTU operated as an independent federation for some time and then voted to become part of the Congress Alliance; and the Congress Alliance as you know was the ANC and the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured Peoples Congress, and the Congress of Democrats. And this was like the fifth wheel to the wagon.

**DJ: Were the people who organised SACTU originally predominantly African trade unionists, other nonwhite trade unions and several smaller trade unions of whites but also open to nonwhites, and did the whites [involved] tend to be those who had been communists before 1950 and others who had been associated with them? Or is this making it too simple?**

That is making it too simple, because I don't think although one or two of them may have been described as being communist, I think it would be a generalisation to say that most of them, or a number of them were. Because there were many of them who were not—or should I say there were several who were not.

**DJ: So you would say that the origin of SACTU was primarily a reaction to exclusion of this type of union from the TUCSA which had just been formed?**

It was absolutely that.

**DJ: And it was not predominantly a political organisation at birth?**

Certainly not.

**DJ: Only political in the sense that it was reacting to government policy which excluded them from recognition.**

Yes, that is so. It is important to understand the point that there is a belief held by a number of people that SACTU was established by the Congress of Democrats or the ANC, and this is absolutely untrue. What actually happened was this organisation was formed and only subsequently allied itself to the Congress. It came into being at this particular time because of this particular difference of opinion.

**GMC: In fact it comes into existence after the Congress movement has had a very considerable life.**

Yes, but not the Congress Alliance. What was the date of the Congress Alliance?

**DJ: '55 was Kliptown.**

**GMC: '55 was Kliptown and this is '56; and it's actually not very long before the beginning of the Treason Trial that it comes into existence.**

I am not quite sure of the exact date here; I would like to check on that.

**DJ: But then did the nature of SACTU begin to change—or I will put the question this way: what caused it to affiliate with the Congress Alliance? Which was much more openly a political alliance and association, whereas its origin had in many ways been non-political.**

Well, what I am going to say now is just my own analysis of the situation. And I believe this, that the majority of the workers within SACTU accepted that everything was political, for instance the getting of a job, the keeping of a job, the belonging to a trade union, the freedom to go and take employment elsewhere. In fact every aspect of an African worker's life was affected by political issues. They fully accepted the fact that they could not get the things they were striving for—and that was higher wages, trade union rights, and eventually all the other rights that the underprivileged want—except through political action. And they made it quite clear that they did not exclude politics from their particular activities.

**DJ: And was this something that was made clear at the formation of SACTU, or something that became more clear as SACTU began to operate?**

No, at the very beginning of SACTU it was said very clearly that it was absolute nonsense to say that you could be a non-political trade union movement in South Africa. You could be non-party political but you could not be non-political. No, from the very outset that was their firm point. And I may say in passing that I supported that very strongly. I agreed with that point of view.

**DJ: Were many of the people who were strong in the formation of SACTU among the Africans also members of the ANC?**

Oh, definitely so.

**DJ: So there was already this link at the time.**

Oh, yes.

**DJ: What about the other non-Europeans that were members of unions in SACTU, the Indians and the coloureds. Were they also affiliated—I am thinking particularly of the Indians—with the Indian Congresses?**

I think they must have been. I know some of them were, but I wouldn't like to say what percentage.

**DJ: And then what is it that caused SACTU to accept membership in the Congress Alliance—to become one of the 5 spokes? In a way was this not being specifically party political?**

Well I couldn't answer with authority on this, I could only surmise. And I think that it is quite possible that in the minds of the majority or the executive, or whoever made the final decision, it was thought that this was the only way that they would be able to extend their strength and unity. Because I do know that the ANC—I don't know exactly what year they started—but they began to appeal to workers to join in the trade unions and to become members of the SACTU unions. This was sometime later. I am not sure when it was, but I think you will find that contained in some leaflet or other [document] issued by them. They said it was the duty of every worker to belong to his trade union and to strengthen the trade unions.

**GMC: This was a new position for the ANC, wasn't it?**

I would say it was, yes.

**DJ: At the time that SACTU entered into the Congress Alliance was there a group within SACTU that opposed this affiliation with the Congress Alliance? Or as far as you know were most all of the SACTU people in favor of this?**

I heard of no dissident voice on this question.

**DJ: So then the dissidents against political activity by SACTU, and to a certain extent to political affiliation with the Congress Alliance, came later. Those who disagreed with the political activities of labor unions and SACTU raised their opposition after SACTU had joined the Congress Alliance? Here I am perhaps jumping ahead—**

May I say this, that none of the unions inside SACTU ever raised this criticism. There was no opposition. Let me put it this way, I said earlier I didn't know how many, or if any were opposed to it at the time, but I do know positively that subsequently there was no complaint about it, no defections as a result of it.

**DJ: What did the majority of workers who were members of SACTU do? Was there any particular concentration of the workers in SACTU in one or two industries?**

No.

**DJ: They were fairly widely scattered among the Africans working in the cities, both those in industry and those as clerks, messengers etc?**

Yes, and then SACTU devoted a certain amount of time endeavoring to organise Africans who had been unorganised at the time of division with TUCSA. And they were able to bring into being one or two—several new unions of African workers.

**GMC: In fact then this was a period of strength for African unions, relative to their general history?**

Yes, it was.

**GMC: And you attribute this to the Congress Alliance and the support they got from political bodies, or do you think that it was their own solidarity, or what?**

No, I think that the drive came from the political activity. There was the drive— It couldn't have been that alone of course; there was also the very low pay and the considerable disadvantages suffered by African workers, and many of them were receptive to appeals to join, to belong to trade unions. But should I say the fire and the drive came from the politically motivated Africans inside SACTU.

**GMC: Rather than from this support that you mentioned from the ANC.**

Yes, the ANC never did any recruiting for SACTU. It did all that itself.

**GMC: Oh I see. I thought that you suggested that the ANC put out a leaflet saying they should join trade unions.**

Yes, they did that, but perhaps I haven't put it clearly. They encouraged the people whom they approached on a political basis to become trade union members, but the trade union organising and the work as such was done by SACTU. The ANC itself never went out recruiting members for SACTU or its unions.

**GMC: I see, it was just general encouragement?**

Yes.

**DJ: Were the SACTU members who were ANC members very active in the ANC at that time?**

I can't remember them being prominent in that way.

**DJ: But they were affiliated formally with the ANC.**

Oh yes.

**DJ: What about the organising of the trade unions, the secretaries and the organizers themselves. Was this done by SACTU through their own machinery, or did some of these people actually—were these people actually organised by white trade unionists?**

Not as far as I know. I do know this, that SACTU itself had training classes for trade union officials and trade union organisers. It regarded that as an essential part its work to have these classes.

**DJ: Five, six, seven week courses?**

That's right.

**DJ: Then most of the people who came to these courses were in fact workers but workers in the ranks who had been picked out and shown interest in taking the courses?**

**GMC: What about teachers—were they mostly African too?**

There were African teachers and there were whites.

**GMC: And where did the whites come from?**

Well, I was once called in to lecture on labour history and the origin of white trade unionism in this country, and on British unionism.

**GMC: So there were visiting lecturers?**

Well, I know I was, and I know of two or three other people who were, who were not involved politically anywhere, who were trade unionists essentially who were brought in to lecture on specific aspects of trade unionism.

**DJ: Had many of the Africans who were involved been involved before 1950 for a fairly long time in trade union work, or were there many who became prominent in SACTU who only came into activity in the 1950's.**

No. I think there were some of them who had been there, at least the leadership had been engaged in trade unionism before that.

**DJ: Who would you say were the prominent figures in SACTU?**

At its formation the one name that comes to hand was Leslie Masina. He was one of the Treason Trialists. Perhaps we can check later and bring them back to mind, but he was one of the first top men, an African, I don't know where he is today.

**DJ: And who were the whites that were prominent in SACTU? Had they been associated with the trade union movement previously?**

I don't know for how long previously, but there again I would have to check on the names of those originally connected with them.

**DJ: Were the whites very prominent in the organisation, the top bureaucracy of SACTU?**

Yes, but not many of them; the majority were Africans.

**GMC: The Africans dominated, not the Indians or the coloureds?**

Yes.

**DJ: Did the Indians and the coloureds tend to affiliate to SACTU, or did they tend to remain within the TUCSA, in as much as they were allowed to be members of that organisation?**

Well, that depended a lot on their political, or should I say their trade union attitudes. The personalities play an important part in this, and at that conference in '54 and again in '56 in Cape Town, when they wanted to create trade union unity—in other words more activity in the lobbies than there was in the conference hall. And a lot of surprising decisions were made and a lot of votes were cast there on some vital issues that were explained to me privately by many of the delegates who felt a bit confused and sometimes ashamed of the way they had behaved, but they didn't know why.

You see, we have to be clear in our minds, when the decision came for the formation of TUCSA there was no crisp clear-cut issue. There was a considerable amount of confusion. It was called in order to build the strongest possible front of trade unions to resist the bill, and all it did was that it ended up by bringing [together] a number of unions and excluding Africans entirely now. In other words, it took a step to the right and it subsequently ended up by not resisting the bill at all.

I was on the Select Committee—the bill was referred to a Select Committee after the second reading—and we sat for a long time and one of the most shattering experiences in my life was when the Trade Union Council representatives came and gave evidence. The Nationalist members of the committee afterwards were quite jubilant and they said to me, but where are all your friends that were going to do this that and the other? I had been fighting it in Parliament and I had warned of all sorts of dire results from the trade unionists and that never eventuated. The trade unionists when it came to the showdown, there was hardly a whisper from them.

**GMC: How do you explain that?**

I explain that mainly due to the fear of the majority of the white trade union leaders of their rank and file. In most of the unions, they were completely out of touch with their rank and file. They have the closed shop operating where the employer deducts the trade union subscriptions and sends it to the union. There is always a very, very small attendance at trade union meetings, barely a quorum. Many of the members of these unions say "Oh to hell with the union, I am not interested in the union," but they remain members. And such a thing as a rank and file conference on a proper basis, a general meeting and all that, where the real issues affecting the trade unions are debated, are non-existent. In other words the leaders of the trade unions found it expedient to dodge these issues to keep peace and unity in their unions.

And you see that was reflected in the fact that the white workers are voting for the Nationalist government—or some of them for the United Party, but they wouldn't vote for instance for a Labour candidate, for a Labour candidate like myself, who would be too much to the left. Or should I say too much of a *kaffirboetie*, you see, a nigger-lover.

If I may dwell on this point for a moment I will give you an example. My last election in 1958 in Rosettenville, 80% of the voters in that constituency were English speaking workers who were traditionally supporters of the Labour Party. They were members of the TUCSA unions. Now if TUCSA had had any influence over its members I would have walked in by a 5 to 1 majority. And we canvassed that constituency in several ways, but one of the ways was my friends in TUCSA came out and we had lists of all their members in the constituency. And officials of the unions canvassed these people, and we re-canvassed them, and when it came to election day they voted for the Opposition [the United Party]. And when the position was put to them very clearly that here was one labour voice that would speak for them as a labour voice, they were not interested in that at all. Some of them hid their feelings, one or two others said, "oh no, he wants to give the kaffirs the vote." But that was very rare, most of them said fine, but they didn't do it.

They voted U.P., some voted Nationalist, but they voted U.P. on the basis that only the U.P. could hold the Nats. The racial issue was more important to them than the economic issue, and it still is, of course.

**DJ: After SACTU had been going for some time I gather that there were some dissidents, and that some people became more interested in forming, or setting up an organisation that would not fight political battles—an organisation of African unions. And from this in some way or another, came forth— What would you say were the origins of FOFATUSA [Federation of Free African Trade Unions]?**

Well, the first thing I want to say is that FOFATUSA did not come into being because of any differences within SACTU. Its origin is somewhat obscure but I hope I am not jumping to conclusions when I say that I believe there were two factors that brought it into being. I think one was the fact that there was some support expected to be forthcoming from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions



(ICFTU) for an anti-communist nonwhite trade union organisation in this country. And the temptation of financial support from overseas was tremendously important. I think that was one factor.

Another was that there were some of these trade unions that had no connection with SACTU but they also had a political objective—although they denied it—but they were connected with the Pan Africanist Congress. And so the Federation of Free African Trade Unions of South Africa came into being and subsequently they did get financial support from Brussels and they became affiliates of the ICFTU. I may say I have discussed all this with the ICFTU subsequently myself. I believe that they were misled on this particular issue; they did not quite understand what the involvement was. Not that I was hostile to FOFATUSA. On the contrary, I probably did more for FOFATUSA than I ever did for SACTU.

But what disturbed me about FOFATUSA was that there was a handful of people at the top but I could never make contact with rank and file, with membership, or delegate conferences or anything. They were always terribly evasive and I got them together one day and said, "Look, I believe there is room for plenty of trade union activity among Africans in this country; you don't like SACTU, by all means form FOFATUSA, form anything, but the job to do is to organise African workers into trade unions, because it is only through their strength in the trade union movement that they can make any real demand for legal recognition of African trade unions in this country. And of equal recognition, to belong to any trade union of his choosing." Well I could never really get to grips with them on this particular issue because the main driving force was [Jacob] Nyaose who was one of the PAC men who went to jail for three years, and the other was Lucy Mvubelo of the Garment Workers Union and Sarah Chitja, also of the Garment Workers.

**DJ: What were these unions that made up the core of FOFATUSA? Were they outside SACTU to begin with?**

That's right. There was the Garment Workers' Union of African women.

**DJ: Who stayed affiliated with the White Garment Workers' Union?**

Well, not so— liaised very firmly, though not so legally, because the law does not allow it. But as far as it is possible they are tied up. And I think it is fair to say that the direction and control of that union is in the hands of the white union—at least of the general secretary and her assistants, of the white union. They control and direct that union from the outside. Then there was a small Tobacco Workers' union, Mr. Hlongwane, and they are under the control of the white registered Tobacco Workers' union. Then there was the Motor Industries Employers Union, they were not affiliated to anybody. Then there is the Sweet Workers' Union, that is controlled by the registered union which is in the control of Hester Cornelius of the Garment Workers' Union. So I think you will see from what I have said to you now that those unions were mainly the unions that were satellites of white unions.

**DJ: And so they had been satellites of white unions that were members of TUCSA?**

That is so, yes.

**DJ: And you would be inclined to say that the fact that they were satellites, the fact that there was an offer of money or it seemed to be promised from ICFTU, and some PAC affiliations among some of the people, were the causes that led to...**

Yes. I don't speak as an authority—again I say this—but my political nose leads me to believe that there was very likely a PAC instrument that brought into being FOFATUSA. The leaders subsequently, or all the people involved in FOFATUSA may not have been aware of this, but I am quite convinced in the conflict that arose in the African National Congress that led to the break away of the Pan Africanists, I

think that they recognised that they couldn't isolate themselves from trade union activity either, and I think that that is what motivated them into getting FOFATUSA into being. It may be that some of the trade unionists, or may be all of them, did not know that they were being used in this way, but that I think is a very fair guess on my part.

**DJ: What would you say is the attitude of FOFATUSA to Indians and coloureds?**

Well, FOFATUSA's attitude was the PAC attitude, which adds to my guess, and that was this: "African trade unions for Africans." We are not—the proposition was put to me, I found it very difficult to get it clearly stated, but it was eventually put to me in this way, that they believed Africans had the right to form their own unions and form their own alliances on their own bat, without decisions being made for them by whites.

But I found this rather difficult to understand in view of the fact that these trade unions themselves were under the subservience of white unions. For instance, if these people didn't toe the line any of them could have been sacked. It may not apply today with the Garment Workers Union of African women because I think that they have got numerically so strong and so entrenched that they would go to the rank and file for protection. But in the other unions I know it was quite a simple matter for them to be thrown out.

**GMC: You think that the white unions that sponsor if not control them, recognise this PAC sponsorship? Do those white union officials that had an influence on these unions which formed FOFATUSA realise that there was a PAC influence on FOFATUSA?**

No, I certainly think they did not. No, it wasn't collusion or design; it was something— As you say, there were several contributory factors that brought it into being.

**DJ: And what about Indians and coloureds? Did they say they should organise for themselves.**

No, they made no attempt to organise them, they said they were not interested in other nonwhites, only interested in Africans.

**DJ: Then why is it that you think there were specifically the links between FOFATUSA and PAC?**

Well there was article in *Drum* which showed that leading members of FOFATUSA were also leading members of PAC.

**DJ: This article appeared when? Before Sharpeville?**

I am not sure, but about that time. It was before the PAC was outlawed. And I was told that on the Saturday before Sharpeville, when FOFATUSA held a conference in the Trades Hall, that a large number of supporters of PAC were present throughout the afternoon and seemed to dominate the proceedings.

**DJ: So you think there might have been a link, but on the basis of the information you have you just can't estimate the nature of the thing, between some of the people in FOFATUSA and PAC.**

That's right. I don't know which members of FOFATUSA were involved in it and which persons of FOFATUSA formed this link.

**GMC: Have you the impression that FOFATUSA was quite well organised?**

No, on the contrary, it was very badly organised. And my impression always of FOFATUSA was that it was a head without a body—that there were a few officials congregating in this office, writing voluminous letters all over the world, not only in South Africa, and giving the impression of a powerful organisation. For instance, I was shown their correspondence file with the ICFTU, and I had never seen anything to equal it, the vast correspondence, that was carried on there. And I read in some of this correspondence a report of activities that were quite unknown to anybody in the trade union movement in South Africa.

**GMC: So they were really putting up a front that was not there?**

That is so.

**DJ: Do you think that at any time they really had any significance?**

Never.

**DJ: So you would be inclined to think it was primarily a small group of five you mentioned, that made up the concentration, and that was about it in FOFATUSA, with the exception of the leadership?**

That is so.

**DJ: The leadership however did claim it was forming other unions in addition to the 5 that had come together to form FOFATUSA?**

That is true.

**GMC: But erroneously?**

But at no stage did I ever get any evidence of any such unions being formed or of any real effort to do so.

**DJ: So you don't feel that FOFATUSA appointed many effective organisers, or made any real attempt to do so?**

Well, in recent years since they have been in receipt of money from the ICFTU, they have had a couple of organisers who have been busy, and who have attempted to organise. And they have said they have organised a few unions, but I don't know what the unions are. And I don't know what the unions do or when they meet.

**DJ: Would you say that FOFATUSA, even though its activity was at all times relatively limited, reached the peak of its activity around the time of Sharpeville and then declined, or is that hard to place?**

Well, it is difficult to place it so simply because whatever activity FOFATUSA did have has been mainly subsequent to Sharpeville when it has been affiliated to the ICFTU.

**DJ: When did it formally affiliate with the ICFTU?**

I haven't the exact date here, and I couldn't say off hand, but it must run back now about 4 years.

**DJ: Do you feel that SACTU in contrast was well organised, or better organised on a grass roots basis, in terms of meetings of the rank and file, really meaningful delegate conferences, active organisational campaigns?**

Yes, I can say that positively. Because I had an invitation almost every year to open their annual conference and I went there just as an expert on labour matters and a sympathiser of African trade unions. My role was well known to them and I always got an enthusiastic welcome, and on every occasion the attendance was enormous. Well, perhaps I am exaggerating now; the attendance was very encouraging. Let me say for instance in Cape Town during one Parliamentary session when I opened the Salt River [meeting], the hall was crowded and this was a delegate conference plus a rank and file conference. In Johannesburg on three occasions when I addressed the conference the hall was crowded and very enthusiastic. They published an agenda and they published minutes of their conferences. You see this is why I discriminate between them and FOFATUSA. Documents never came from FOFATUSA.

**DJ: You think that they were a much more regular trade union organisation, including all their political activities?**

Yes, one can disagree here with some of their political activity. I did—you know my attitude on that. But as trade unionists they operated I believe intelligently and conscientiously. Of course they weren't a lot of saints, you know. There were a lot of individuals that I found were quite impossible and I thought should never have been anywhere near the trade union movement. But taken by and large, I say that SACTU, looked upon purely from a trade union standpoint, was comparable with the best of white registered trade unions in the federations in the country.

**DJ: Considering the disadvantages under which it operated? Or –**

If I took into account the disadvantages under which it operated, then I would say it was even better than a lot of the other unions. And why I say that, I don't refer so much to their administrative work and their office work which always seemed to be up to quite a good standard, but in their field work at the factory level, and in their contact with the members.

**DJ: How did you get evidence of this, that they were actively working in the factories, that they were out in the field?**

Yes, I had this experience, a number of the affiliated African unions used to come for me to assistance in drawing up memoranda and advice in making wage claims. And through that I was able to learn that they were busy attempting to negotiate with employers. They were in contact with workers in various factories, they would bring me their complaints—

**DJ: Specific grievances which you could identify from a certain factory?**

Absolutely, yes. In the printing industry for instance, they came to me as they saw that the white employees were negotiating a new agreement and they wanted to submit evidence themselves—they are not entitled to negotiate—and the African union asked me to assist them in drawing up a memorandum for the Industrial Council, that's the employers and the employees. And when I did so they gave me a mass of information regarding discrimination in the factories and work done by Africans that was provided for in the agreement for white workers, or coloured workers, but the Africans were doing the work for a much lower rate. And it was obvious from all the information they gave me that they had contact with the workers in the factories, and these complaints had actually come from the factory level.

**GMC: How effective do you think they were in their relations with employers?**

They were effective only, should I say, to the extent that the registered unions belonging to SACTU had access to employers on a legal basis through industrial councils. But in addition to that some of the African unions had established contact with employers who dealt with them.

**GMC: On their own personal—**

On an unofficial level. But not all of them, most of the unions affiliated—the African unions affiliated to SACTU—labored under the disadvantage that the employers were afraid to negotiate or deal with them. Because the department of labor were constantly warning employers to have nothing to do with African trade unions. So this made the job of the organisers extremely difficult. But what they did was they organised workers in factories and then they would, by using their white officials, such as a fellow like Leon Levy, who was the secretary at the time, he would phone up or go and see the employers and speak up for the Africans. And on many occasions I know that he had success. But as a rule, because of the non-recognition of African unions and the fear of employers to offend the Government, it was extremely difficult for them to have arrangements for negotiation. Once an organiser from any African union—I may say FOFATUSA unions where they have attempted to negotiate—or let's take the Garment Workers Union of African women, where they have gone to factories to organise, they have run against this same difficulty, but not on the same scale. But they have run up against the same difficulty of police interference and the department of labour interfering.

**GMC: You mean that FOFATUSA is given a certain preference from the official side? The Government is not so worried about it?**

No, I wouldn't say that. I would rather put it this way, that because of the existence of the registered trade union in the clothing industry, the employers have been trained to deal with them. But secondly because [when] the general secretary of the white union sets the base of negotiation, she really does it on behalf of the Africans.

**DJ: So SACTU's job to a certain extent was more difficult in the areas where there were not parallel white recognised trade unions.**

White or coloured unions.

**DJ: Registered or recognised organisations, whether they be coloured, Indian or white.**

That's right.

**GMC: What happened after the ANC and PAC were banned? What happened to SACTU? Did it take in many of their most active members?**

I don't think it took any at all. I have no knowledge of any; there may have been some but I have no knowledge of any at all. As far as I can remember SACTU has carried on with the same officials, of course until they got banned or left the country.

**GMC: Has this been a fairly continuous process or is it only speeding up now?**

It has been for some time but it has speeded up terrifically lately. My opinion is that the government is trying to destroy SACTU, not by outlawing it the way it did the ANC, but by outlawing its members.

**GMC: The way it is doing with the Indian Congress.**

Yes. You see it makes it quite impossible for these unions to carry on. The African unions depend upon the organising secretary. There is one man operating from a little office, and he has to do every job. Well, you ban him and the union just has nothing left.

**GMC: And this is particularly in the last 6 months or so, do you think?**

Yes.

**GMC: I can notice it day by day in the papers. In the last six months they have banned all but two of the executive members. And the permanent staff has also been banned and as they take on new staff, they get banned too, you know.**

**DJ: What was the affiliation, or was there any affiliation at any time of SACTU with the World [Federation of Trade Unions] ?**

Well, there seems to be some confusion about this. I was told by the ICFTU that they had had evidence that SACTU had at one stage affiliated with the WFTU, and I challenged the SACTU leadership at the time on this, and they denied it. They said that they had followed the policy of the All African Trade Union Federation of Africa, and that was that they wanted to adopt a neutralist position where they could call upon either the anti-Communist or the pro-Communist trade union federations at any time, and they wanted to maintain cordial relations with both sides. But they said they had never applied for affiliation nor had they ever been taken as—invited to become affiliates. And they gave me their assurance that they were not affiliated with WFTU, and that's as far as I know.

**DJ: Did they send organisers and members of their unions overseas for training?**

Not to my knowledge.

**GMC: Is there any relation with the High Commission territories?**

No, none at all.

**DJ: And where is SACTU's main strength within SA would you say?**

It's main strength was in the four centres, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban.

**GMC: And they kept a fairly good liaison with each other?**

Very good, and when they had their annual conference which I addressed there were delegates from all those areas.

**GMC: I wanted also to ask if there was considerable discussion in the conferences.**

Tremendous. As a matter of fact it was from the floor that most of the discussion took place and often there were fiery speeches from the floor. This was the sort of trade union conference I like to see, where there is a great deal of argument and discussion. And to me it was a very healthy sign.

**GMC: Was it quasi-political, or mainly industrial?**

I find it very difficult to separate them, but on the issue for instance, when they come to the issue— There is a resolution from one affiliated union for instance to oppose the influx control, and delegates get up and they recount bitter experiences they have had, you know. And this goes on, and they denounce the government from the beginning to the end for these [pass] laws.