

WORKERS RESIST CONTROLS ON OUR UNION.

Since the time our Union was started in 1973, we have built up the Union by relying only on the organised strength of the workers. The workers have always seen how the government and the bosses try to prevent the workers organising, and how they try to weaken any organisation the workers establish.

But over past ten years, workers all over the country have stood together and and have formed unions. In order to be strong, the workers in our Union have insisted that one basic principle of the Union never be changed : Democratic control of the Union by the workers and only by the workers.

The government and the bosses initially tried to pretend that unions like ours did not exist and tried to ignore us. But the organised workers in the factories made this impossible. The government and the bosses then tried to intimidate and crush the unions by firing workers, leaders in the Unions, and by other acts of intimidation. Again the workers continued to stand together.

The government and the bosses then decided to try a new attack on the workers' unions - this time by placing controls on the unions. This was the effect of the Wiehan Commission which recommended that unions of African workers be recognised by the government - but not because the government wanted to advance the struggle of the workers not because the government was recognizing the rights of workers in the factories and the country, but because the government and bosses saw this as a way of controlling the growing strength of the workers in the unions.

The government tried to bring the unions under control by saying that the unions could now "register", something which African unions had previously not been allowed to do. But to "register" a union means more than just telling the government of the union's existence. The government can impose all sorts of conditions on the union in order to make it acceptable to the government for registration. Once registered, the government then has the right to investigate the union at any time and to interfere in its daily running.

But if this "registration" only means control by the government, why would any union want to register ? The answer to this is mainly for 2 reasons. Firstly because registration would mean a possible end to attacks on the unions by the government . And secondly because most of the bosses said that they would only talk to "registered" unions - so if the unions wanted an easy road to talking to the bosses they would have have to register. Even then, many bosses said they would only talk to the registered unions on an industrial council - a council of bosses and union officials far removed from the workers in the factories and therefore easier for the bosses to control.

Our union, and other unions in the country, rejected these moves by the government. We said that we would refuse to register because our strength lay in the hands of the workers. We said that our union must remain controlled by the workers alone and that we would rely on the strength of the workers alone

in order to force the bosses to negotiate with the workers.

We, together with other unions, demanded from the government that certain changes be made to the law before we could even consider registration. We demanded that the law dividing unions by race be abolished, that the controls imposed by the government in the registration procedure be done away with, that any attempts to split up the unions be stopped, and that registration remain voluntary.

Some unions in Durban and Johannesburg decided to register anyway, because they saw this as the only way to get the bosses to agree to talk to them. We disagreed with these unions, saying that we could talk to the bosses from a position of strength only if we relied on the strength of the workers to force the bosses to talk.

Since all this happened, nearly 2 years have passed, and time has shown that we were right - the unions that refused to register have continued to build up strength, and the bosses and the government are now wanting to pass a new law this time to extend to the unregistered unions those controls already placed on the registered unions. Briefly, the proposed law says that in future all unregistered unions will have to give a copy of their constitutions to the government, and other information such as the names of union officials and union office-bearers, copies of the union's yearly financial reports and membership figures. The government would not, however, have any control over any of these things. We have said that we think these proposals should be all that is needed to "register" the union. We believe that to "register" all that the unions need to do is to give the government the facts about the unions, but that any government controls are not acceptable.

In the same law however, the government proposes to place serious new controls on the unions. It proposes that government Labour Department officials will have the right to investigate unregistered unions at any time. It proposes to ban any form of contact or co-operation between the unions and political or community organisations, and it proposes to stop unions, or any body else, from giving money, food or clothing to any workers on strike.

Our union has rejected all of these controls completely. We have told the government that our union is a democratic organisation, controlled by and responsible to the workers, and only the workers. We cannot allow any government interference in the internal affairs of our union. We have told them that it is the right of the workers and the union to work with other organisations dealing with the workers problems in the community. We have told them that it is the duty of the union to assist any workers who have been forced to go on strike, and that the government should be looking at ways of overcoming the problems which force workers to go on strike, rather than ways of forcing workers to go back to work once they are on strike.

This proposed law is therefore a serious attack by the government and the bosses on our union and on all other unions trying to resist government control. But we can take ^{heart} in knowing that it is our strength which has forced the government into trying to pass such law. We have this strength because we have relied only on the democratic organisation of the workers in the factories, and this is why we have to resist these attempts to remove any control of the union from the hands of the workers.

If we are to keep our strength and use this strength to fight for the rights of the workers we in unity with our fellow workers throughout the country have to resist these controls which the government is attempting to place on us.
