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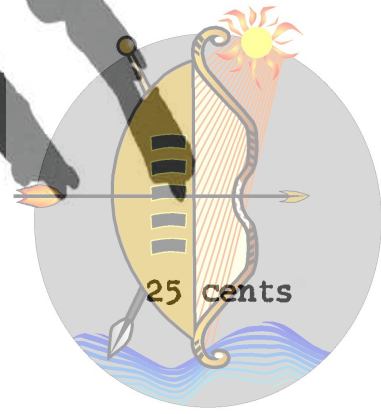


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Editorial

This issue of Social Review carries a number of items of a controversial nature.

There is the letter on trade unions' responses to Wiehahn and the new labour laws which takes a critical view of what are held to be the politics or attitudes of some trade union groupings.

There is the article on boycotts which is a critical appraisal of what are held to be or to have been the policies of political or community organisations.

And there is the article on the controversial question of participation in the South African Indian Council, which introduces a debate currently the subject of much discussion.

We are aware that the views held in at least the first two items are likely to be subjected to some criticism, and not all Social Review readers will be in agreement with the arguments in each article. We see this as a useful and positive function of Social Review, to be a forum for the discussion of controversial issues, and it is strongly hoped that readers who have other points of view to put forward will not hesitate to put them forward for publication in this journal, in the form of an article or a letter.



Forum

A LETTER ON RESPONSES TO WIEHAHN

Dear Editors

After reading your brief article on the Wiehahn Commission in Forum in the last issue of Social Review, I felt that an important topic had been ignored - i.e. the confusing responses of the various black trade union organisations. I found these responses surprising, for one would expect that the assaults which the legislation makes on black workers' rights would elicit a combined and unanimous protest from the black unions so threatened.

Over the past few years it has become clear that different black unions have differing approaches to organising workers and can't be expected to co-operate on all levels. But surely an issue as fundamentally threatening to the labour movement as the new laws can only be dealt with effectively if the unions take a common principled stand rejecting the 'new dispensation'. Surely a common stand would ensure the ongoing ability of these unions to continue in the struggle for workers' rights in South Africa.

If the new laws are so threatening surely worker members of the unions see the need for such a stand, one may well ask. There is no doubt that this is the case. Unionised black workers are fully aware that (a) the exclusion of migrant workers and 'frontier commuters' from registered unions, (b) the prohibition of educational or training programmes in unregistered unions and (c) the ability to control unions through their finances, puts the continued existence of their unions on a knife edge. It is therefore clearly in their interests to fight such proposals with every legitimate means at their disposal.

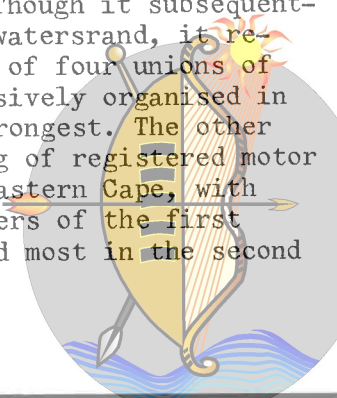
If we argue that one of the motivations behind the new labour laws is the incorporation, where suitable, of the black unions into the statutory industrial relations system, rather than the destruction of the unions as previous tactics of the state have tended towards, then certain points are clear: that if all the unregistered unions were to refuse to opt for registration on the terms being offered, as a part of a united stand, then the terms would have to be changed; the state would have to provide the conditions for registration which the alliance of unions was demanding.

What has the response of the unions been, and why did I refer to it as 'confusing'? The strongest public response of both unions was reported in the Rand Daily Mail on the 13th of June. The article reports that 'simultaneous statements were made by the two co-ordinating bodies which represent the bulk of the black trade union movement'. The two bodies are the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions. The Consultative Committee rejected the Bill as 'totally unacceptable'. FOSATU warned that 'its unions would have to reconsider their position as regards the new labour dispensation'. But, as the article points out, both statements stop short of rejecting the possibility of registration under those conditions, although their disappointment is made clear.

Three elements of the Rand Daily Mail article are worthy of further comment. Firstly notice that 'simultaneous statements' were made; this represents a tentative step in the direction of a common stand, but it is clearly not a joint statement - moreover a number of unregistered black unions fall outside of these two unions.

The second point to emerge from this article, as well as the secretary general of FOSATU's article in the Sunday Tribune is the vagueness of the FOSATU's position, seen in the statement that it would 'reconsider its position'. FOSATU's position must be considered in more detail as it constitutes the most important workers' organisation in South Africa today. The possibility of a coherent, unified response from trade unions would seem to me to depend on FOSATU's course of action.

FOSATU was formed in April this year after years of negotiations (of which details can be found in the SA Labour Bulletin Vol 5 No 1). Its major component is the group of unregistered unions which formerly constituted the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council - TUACC. The TUACC unions emerged in the early seventies based in Natal, in the aftermath of the massive Durban strikes. Though it subsequently spread beyond Natal, mainly to the Witwatersrand, it remained strongest in Natal. It was made up of four unions of which the Metal and Allied Workers, extensively organised in the Transvaal as well as Natal, is the strongest. The other major component of FOSATU is the grouping of registered motor and rubber industry unions based in the Eastern Cape, with headquarters in Port Elizabeth. Most members of the first group of unions are 'african workers', and most in the second 'coloured workers'.



It is clear from FOSATU's policy statements and interviews given after its foundation, that a basic premise of the Federation was to facilitate a unified approach and strong bargaining position for the new labour dispensation. One of the aims and objects in FOSATU's constitution is 'to comment on, advance or oppose any policy of any authority or institution affecting worker interests generally and the interests of the labour movement in particular'. The general secretary of FOSATU, in response to a question on FOSATU's attitude to the Wiehahn Commission asked by the Rand Daily Mail, said 'One of the main motivating factors behind the setting up of FOSATU now, was not to sit and wait for outside forces to shape the labour movement'.

Some sceptics have maintained that FOSATU was set up by union officials rather than the workers themselves, a viewpoint strongly attacked by the general secretary (for example in the Financial Mail of the 20th April). I would think, in view of the demands of workers on a joint position discussed above, that the correctness or otherwise of this criticism would be borne out by FOSATU's response to Wiehahn and the new laws.

The FOSATU unions, in the pre-FOSATU period, aimed tactics towards the possibility of registration. They gave evidence to the Wiehahn Commission and have, for some time, stressed the need for industrial unions which fit in with the industrial relations pattern already established in South Africa. Policy is geared towards recognition agreements. The nature of FOSATU's operation have been towards streamlining the unions within it with those intentions in mind.

The Wiehahn Commission appeared to have produced the kind of proposals that the unions were interested in but the legislation that followed fell short in many respects. Alec Erwin's article in the Tribune reflects this feeling. The exclusion of migrant workers, frontier commuters, and foreign nationals from registered unions meant that the vast bulk of the membership of the black unions would have to be forfeited if registration was taken. The increased powers of the proposed National Manpower Commission as a watchdog of, especially all non-wage oriented activities, was also a disturbing development.

The various changes have been condemned by FOSATU, but its position as regards registration still remains unstated. The fact that the then Minister of Labour also told FOSATU representatives that exemptions to certain unions, on the

question of membership (in terms of Section 1(c)(b) of the new Act) might be granted, also leaves the situation uncertain.

Now it is not possible in this letter to discuss whether registration of these unions is desirable or not. Nevertheless, in terms of FOSATU's policy to consider registration I would have hoped for a stronger response. In terms of the conditions already discussed surely the unionised workers response would be: 'The state does not want to outlaw our unions; if we stand together with other unionised workers and reject the criteria for registration, then the state will be thwarted in its desire to weaken our unions by registering us on its terms'.

The alternatives lie between taking that position, or accepting registration on present terms, or negotiating on points with the state. If either of the latter two courses are taken the fears of the FOSATU secretary general that 'outside forces would shape the labour movement' may become reality.

Unless the cautious, tentative attitude of the unionists is overcome and a common stand, based on the principles of the labour movement, to which all the parties surely subscribe - the right to free association and organisation, and other associated rights - the potentially strong position of the black union movement will have been weakened.

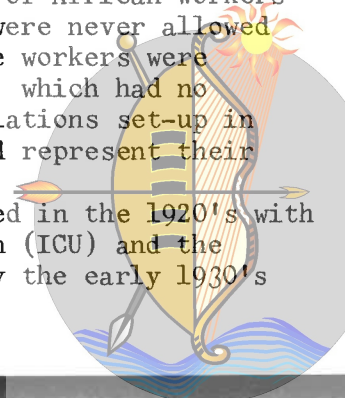
Yours,
Kolya Kolbe.

A note on the unregistered unions

It is likely that a number of Social Review readers know little about the trade unions and federations referred to in the letter above. This note is meant to provide a brief introduction to the organisations.

There have been waves of organisation of African workers in South Africa's past, those workers who were never allowed to belong to registered trade unions. These workers were usually organised into unregistered unions, which had no rights to operate within the industrial relations set-up in South Africa, but were allowed to exist and represent their members under very limiting conditions.

The first wave of unionisation occurred in the 1920's with the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) and the Federation of Non European Trade Unions. By the early 1930's



these organisations no longer existed. In the course of the 1930's, with the increased industrialisation of the period, a number of new unions developed, mainly on the Reef, and formed themselves into the two major federations in the later 1930's. After the 1946 mineworkers' strike these unions, after a period of aggressive organisation, were forced on the defensive and went into a slow decline.

The 1950's, with the establishment of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), saw a revival of unregistered union activity but this declined rapidly after the banning of the ANC with which it was closely associated in the Congress Alliance.

For much of the sixties there was little unregistered union activity. In the early seventies, however, there was a re-emergence of African worker organisation in all the main centres. On the Reef the Urban Training Project assisted in the establishment of several unions which were industrial unions for African workers only. In Natal, particularly after the 1973 Durban strikes several unions emerged, with a non-racial position, though at first organising only African workers. These mainly industrial unions were associated within the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council, and later began organising in the Transvaal too.

In the Western Province the emphasis was on the development of factory committees, which later formed themselves into the Western Province General Workers Union. The African Food and Canning Workers Union, which works as one with the registered ('coloured') Food and Canning Workers Union has also re-emerged as a potent force in the Western Cape.

In the mid-seventies a workers organisation called the Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU) was formed, with very close links to the black consciousness movement. This organisation, which organised sporadically in the Transvaal and Natal, went into a decline in the late seventies and now seems to exist only as an exile organisation.

These new unions have not had it easy. There have been many organisers and officials banned over the last five years, and some have been detained - some did not come out of detention alive. During strikes and other actions workers and organisers have been arrested, imprisoned, sacked and endorsed out.

Over the past few years there has been negotiation over a national union federation, but for a number of reasons that cannot be discussed in this short note, only a section of the unions went into the new Federation of South African Trade Unions.

A LETTER ON BUS-FARE PRICES

Dear editors,

Although you have good articles on current events, since the article on the General Sales Tax you have not again looked at the question of the politics of prices and profit-making. This example, of bus fares in Cape Town, shows again the way that profits are increased in a way that confrontation is avoided.

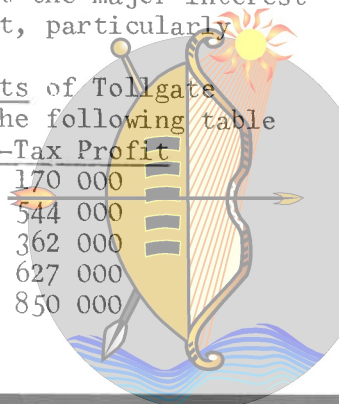
The recent sharp rise in the price of petrol and other fuel was the immediate cause of recent exorbitant increases in bus fares in the Cape Town area. Fares were more than doubled in some places. In the remainder of the country, increases in transport costs are occurring or can be expected.

The whole question of transport is of great political significance in South Africa. People resent the fact that the long distances they must travel (and consequently the high transport costs) are largely a result of the government policy of re-locating blacks in townships far from the city centre and the workplace. In other words, the high cost and the poor quality of transport falls especially heavily on the black working population (despite the existence of subsidies), and this is closely linked to racial oppression and the political position of blacks in this country.

Below are some background facts to the fare increase in Cape Town. Buses in Cape Town are run by a private concern - City Tramways (or, more generally, Cape Tramways). This company is totally controlled by Tollgate Holdings, a group whose assets exceed R120 million. Other companies in the group include almost all the bus companies in the Western Cape and the major ones in Port Elizabeth and Pinetown. In addition, Tollgate Holdings has significant interests in the insurance, property and manufacturing/services spheres. Many of these companies provide back-up facilities for the transport division, and it is therefore true to generalise that the major interest of Tollgate Holdings is in public transport, particularly buses.

Over recent years the after-tax profits of Tollgate Holdings have increased dramatically, as the following table shows:

<u>Year</u>	<u>After-Tax Profit</u>
1974	R 3 170 000
1975	R 3 544 000
1976	R 5 362 000
1977	R 6 627 000
1978	R 8 850 000





"SORRY, THE FUEL PRICE HAS GONE UP."

The company itself has admitted that over 60% of these profits are derived from the passenger transport division. However, this is an underestimate since many of the other divisions exist solely to support the transport division. Thus many profits which are made through passenger transport end up (officially) as profits from, say, property.

Controlling so many companies enables Tollgate to do a number of things, all legal under the capitalist system. For example: (a) fuel is bought by a Tollgate subsidiary and resold to City Tramways at a greater profit than allowed to garage owners; (b) properties were leased to Tramways by a subsidiary, Tollgate Property Corporation; (c) insurance on the bus company is placed with another Tollgate subsidiary, Shield, operating in the insurance division; (d) City Tramways loaned money interest free to a Tollgate subsidiary, while it borrowed money and paid interest.

All of the above financial moves make the transport division look less profitable than it actually is. It can safely be said that whilst 60% of Tollgate's profits may derive from the transport division, much of the profits made in other divisions

are a result of direct transport-connected operations. Example (a) above illustrates well how certain transactions between companies controlled by the same holding company can shift profits from one company to the other without affecting the total profitability of the group. In this case, profits were shifted out of transport because of its politically sensitive nature.

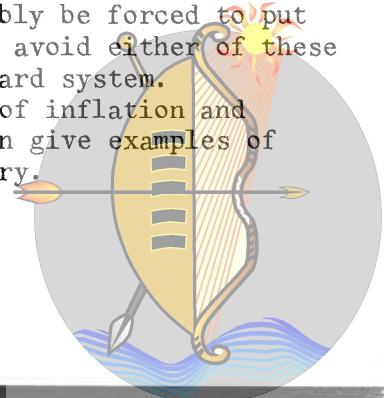
It may seem hard to understand why City Tramways and the other transport companies, go to such lengths to make their profits look smaller. After all, the Local Road Transportation Board does not look at profitability when considering fare increases. The reason may possibly be found in the public relations work which the company is always engaged in. They have perhaps seen that a good 'public image' is the best way to avoid angry mass action against fare increases. They have blamed the latest steep rise on such things as the price of petrol, the increase in the price of parts, and wage increases to the bus drivers. All of these reasons are to some extent valid, but they imply that the company is simply being hit by increasing costs which it cannot avoid. 'Poor company, yes we understand', is the hoped for response. Obviously their real concern is to maintain and increase their rate of profit. But since this looks bad they try to pretend that profits are not what interests them, and they reduce these (on paper) to reinforce their argument.

The other way that City Tramways has been forced to tread carefully in political waters, is with the clip-card system. This card, bought weekly and used for that week is aimed directly at workers, who travel every day to their jobs and back. If the clipcards are used twice a day, every working day, the price of each trip is about what it used to be before the massive increase. This clip-card system is subsidised by the state. There are two reasons for it: (1) if it were not used, the workers, who use the buses twice a day, would get extremely angry and might take political action; (2) the bosses who employ the workers would probably be forced to put their wages up. The state would prefer to avoid either of these two occurrences, and so we see the clip-card system.

This is one example of the politics of inflation and profit-making. I am sure other readers can give examples of similar situations elsewhere in the country.

Yours,

Azikwelwa, Cape Town.



Boycotts in South Africa

The boycott has often been used as a weapon by the people in South Africa. Recently there have been widespread boycotts of Bantu Education by the students themselves. In the Western Cape there is currently a boycott of Fattis & Monis products in solidarity with workers who were dismissed from that firm. Looking further back in history there have been many heroic episodes involving the boycott. The example of the vigorous and sustained bus-boycotts by the people of Alexandra in the 1950's is amongst the most well known. The people walked, rather than use the buses, for weeks on end, in order to protest against increased fares. In the end, fares were brought down to the original level; a victory for the people. Even in recent years the boycott has been used to protest against price hikes on the buses - some boycotts have been successful, others not. We can simply list some names: Kwa-Thema, Mdantsane, Gelvandale, Madadeni and Osizweni were the places of the some of the larger bus-boycotts in recent years. 'Azikwelwa' has been the historic call in these cases.

The boycott has also been used in areas which are more directly political. The elections for the Soweto community council faced a widespread active boycott. The campaign was to show up the uselessness and impotence of the community council. In the first elections there were problems in getting people who were prepared to stand, let alone vote! In the by-elections the poll was embarrassingly low. Soweto, with 1½ million people found itself with a 'mayor' when less than 6% of the registered voters actually voted! (1) Thebehali was revealed in all his nakedness like the king without his clothes. Even the Committee of Ten people, who showed distinct signs of wanting to join at least the by-elections, were forced to take account of the popular mood and join the boycott. Inkatha, which did participate, received a major setback.

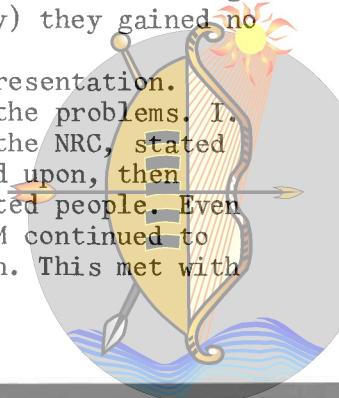
But in order to understand the whole boycott issue more thoroughly, it is necessary to do more than look at examples from the past. What must be drawn out are the threads which make up a boycott, the issues which are at stake, and the problems which can emerge.

Let us take a brief step backwards into history to look at an early example of debate over the boycott question. During the 1940's a political grouping, the Non-European

Unity Movement (NEUM)*, was calling for the boycott of all government institutions particularly bodies such as the Native Representative Council (NRC). The NRC was an advisory body consisting of elected and nominated African members. It had no powers and its requests and motions were seldom listened to. The NRC was set up as a consequence of the 1936 'native acts', which, amongst other things, disenfranchised the Cape African voters. The NEUM argued that blacks should refuse to take part in such bodies, which were intended for their oppression, and accused all who did so of being 'stooges' and 'collaborators'. It would have been best if the NRC had been boycotted on its inception in 1937. There is no doubt that the more militant groups who called for this, were aware that a total boycott would have killed the NRC at birth. The problem was that such a boycott would have had to be a near total one in order to be successful. And this was unlikely to occur since black political organisation was at the time dominated by conservative, middle class elements, anxious not to alienate themselves from the white establishment. These leaders were also influential in the African community as a whole.

The NEUM was a small organisation consisting chiefly of intellectuals and professionals and with little mass support. Its calls for a boycott, however 'pure' or principled, suffered from two serious problems. Firstly, it called for the boycott on the basis of a moral, principled argument and failed to see that a boycott was simply a weapon to be used only in the right circumstances and conditions. For them the boycott had to be adhered to, regardless of the state of organisation and political education amongst the masses. And here arose the second problem: because they had little mass following and organisation, their boycott call was doomed to becoming a sterile slogan. It inevitably became beautiful words without contact with reality and without concrete applicability. So because they had no mass following they up slogans which were wrong at the time, and because their slogans were 'principled' (and not adapted to reality) they gained no mass support.

This is of course a crude schematic representation. NEUM leaders were, to some extent, aware of the problems. I. Tabata who had advocated a total boycott of the NRC, stated in 1941 that if a boycott could not be agreed upon, then nominations should at least be made by a united people. Even after the demise of the NRC in 1946, the NEUM continued to push for widespread use of the boycott weapon. This met with



reservations in many quarters. An example of this was a letter written in 1949 by Moses Kotane in which he stated: 'Their non-collaboration policy is in one sense a cover or pretext for not doing any practical work. While I am strongly for the boycotting of the inferior institutions set up to perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of the African people, I nevertheless do not agree that the boycott should be carried out without regard to the support we have for it' (2).

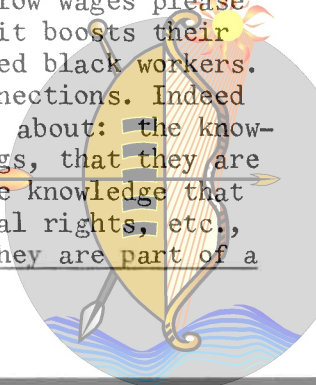
The key point is thus made that politics involves a clear and careful assessment of the real conditions prevailing (without resorting to illusions, myths and romanticisation of past glories). The question then is how best one can further the cause of freedom and democracy, in this or that situation, and at this or that moment. The key elements here are the level of political understanding and of organisation amongst the mass of the people. It is important not to make the actual practice of one period into a hardened 'principle' which may be wrong in another period. An example here is the boycott of Bantu Education by the SSRC in Soweto. Bantu Education was not popular before 1976 when there was no widespread boycott of classes. The fact that students were attending school was no indication that they were accepting inferior education or that they were participating in their own oppression. Rather it indicated that the organisation and determination of the students had not progressed far enough. When in June 1976 (and even earlier), the boycott began in Soweto, it resulted in the first place from opposition to the 50-50 policy of language instruction and from the students being organised. It was the former resentment that sparked off the student action and it was only the resulting police actions and deaths which caused the spreading of the struggle.

The struggle spread from students to the community as a whole - workers, youth, even professionals were drawn in - and then over time it spread to the remainder of the country. But here lay the roots of the problem in that the conflict with the state had gone further than the students themselves had initially imagined. There was the possibility of the student body losing direction if a clear direction was not discussed. There was the danger of the student organisation losing its strength because the very basis of that strength (the schools) were themselves the target of a boycott. The students were (to some extent) dispersed throughout Soweto. In short, the events themselves were running ahead of the student organisation and their political understanding. What

was desperately needed was consolidation. It is from this angle that the SSRC call for students to return to classes must be seen. It was not, as some said, 'unprincipled', nor did it indicate that the students accepted Bantu Education. Of course it was a compromise (in that it made the students seem to be withdrawing from their position), but it was a compromise necessitated by the development of real events and real changes in the political situation in Soweto. It enabled the students to reorganise, regain the initiative and spread their struggle beyond the confines of Bantu Education.

What we see therefore are a number of problems concerning political tactics. Firstly we must understand that to 'compromise' does not always mean to 'sell out', on 'principles' or anything else. Take a group of factory workers who go on strike over wages or working conditions. They may hold out for days, even weeks; they may be well organised and highly motivated. And yet it happens that things go against them - the boss is stubborn, the state may be threatening, unemployed workers may be queueing up to take their jobs, hunger at home may be earring into their energy and commitment. They may see that they are losing their strike and, rather than be given the sack and face total defeat, the workers decide to return to work. Of course they have 'lost', but is this more of a setback than a total defeat. Would anyone condemn them for having compromised, for not having stood firm on their demands (on their 'principles')? Rather the workers have realised that when one is fighting an enemy and losing it is sometimes better to run away, recover one's strength and return when that enemy least expects it. To continue to fight because in 'principle' one is correct, may seem very noble, but is hardly the key to success.

And this brings up a second problem, the tendency to look at things too narrowly. Most people are aware of the connections between things. They realise that the origins of inferior education lie in the lack of political rights. This in turn allows the imposition of influx control on African people. The passes help keep labour controlled and cheap. The low wages please the local and foreign industrialists since it boosts their profits. They have little desire for educated black workers. And so it goes on and on, this chain of connections. Indeed this is what political understanding is all about: the knowledge that events are not isolated happenings, that they are not the result of fate or irrationality. The knowledge that passes, low wages, Bantu education, political rights, etc., are not separate from each other but that they are part of a



system. And yet this simple fact is often forgotten. There is often a tendency for people to get so caught up in one struggle (e.g. against Bantu Education) that they forget the broader struggle. This leads to people forgetting that the goal is democracy and real freedom, and not seeing the other struggles as important steps along the way. In practice this leads to situations where one particular issue and the weapon of struggle (e.g. boycott, strike, standing for elections) that is used at one particular moment becomes hardened into a 'principle' from which no retreat or deviation is possible. There is not necessarily a contradiction in calling for a boycott over one issue in 1974 and not calling for one in 1978. There may be a point at which a boycott will advance mass education and organisation. At other times a boycott may have a negative effect and retard the march towards freedom - a march which never runs in a straight line.

We can look briefly at the relevance of the above arguments for the debate currently raging about participation in the Indian Council elections. The key point is that participation or boycott should not be decided on the basis of 'principle', but rather by analysing the current realities in South African and Natal. The decision is essentially a tactical one. This means taking a long hard, non-dogmatic and cool-headed look at a multitude of concrete questions. It also means being open-minded about the boycott/participation options, and not deciding on the basis of previous decisions which may have been correct at the time. Questions such as these must be asked and answered: What is the extent of mass organisation amongst the Indian people? What is the political consciousness of the average Indian worker? Would participation be understood as collaboration by democratic forces in the rest of the country? Do the elections provide sufficient openings for political mobilisation to justify participation? What are the options? Would participation/boycott deepen or narrow the Indian/African divisions which admittedly exist in Natal? What is the significance of Natal's non-participation in the 1976 uprising, for the question at hand? Does participation in the SAIC elections mean a rejection of other forms of struggle? How do the participationist group prevent themselves from becoming ethnically limited and Indian-centred in their demands and actions? What are the dangers and the advantages of participation/boycott? These are the sort of questions to be faced (and this writer is not certain about the answer). What is not at stake is the institution, the SA Indian Council.

Of course it is a rotten, ethnically-based institution, set up to keep Africans and Indians divided and to co-opt Indians under the leadership of the merchant class. About this there is no division between the camps of the democrats who call for boycott or participation. But the intention and structure of an institution is not necessarily its reality, not necessarily its possibilities.

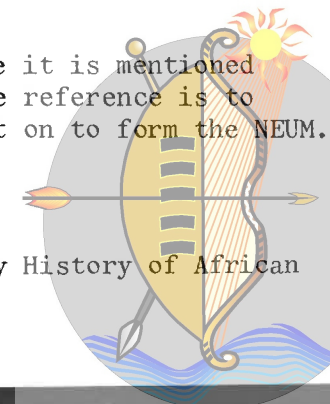
Thus far this article has rejected the notion of boycott as a 'principle', and this has the logical consequences that one can consider non-boycott as a valid method of struggle in certain circumstances. But it is a huge leap from this to stating that all compromises, all participation, etc., are correct. Quite clearly compromises are not good things, they are necessities at certain moments, and one should never let this become an excuse for political opportunism. Here one thinks of the Coloured Labour Party which participates in the CRC elections. They would appear to compromise on all questions (even to the extent of going back on an election promise to close down the CRC). Their participation is not to organise the masses nor to further the political education of the people. Their idea of rejecting ethnic politics, is to threaten (no more), from time to time, to join up with the African people. They hope that this will scare the ruling class into giving them a greater share of the cake than they have already. Even at the height of the 1976 unrest in Cape Town, the Labour Party continued in the CRC, showing quite clearly that not only did they reject boycotts 'in principle', but also that they accepted 'in principle' compromises (which is even worse).

The aim of this article has been to encourage an understanding of the question of boycott as well as of the need for flexibility in tactics. If people are continually re-assessing developments in South Africa (particularly since 1976) and formulating appropriate response, then this aim will have been largely achieved.

Note:* The NEUM was founded in 1943. Where it is mentioned in connection with earlier years, then the reference is to the groups and individuals who later went on to form the NEUM.

Footnotes:

1. Rand Daily Mail 16.1.79
2. Carter, G. and Karis, T. 'A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa', Vol II.



The SAIC Election Debate: an Introduction

Introduction

This article is meant to be no more than an introduction to the current debate over participation in the South African Indian Council. It is based largely on newspaper reports, and, as such, can be little more than a superficial overview, perhaps even containing the odd error which has been unwittingly carried over from the original reports. It is hoped that readers involved or interested in this debate will contribute in the form of a letter or article. This article has tried to present the debate without partisanship, but due to the greater amount of material available from the pro-boycott grouping, there may be more coverage of their views.

The debate

The disclosure early in May that some members and associates of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) were discussing participation in the South African Indian Council (SAIC) elections, surprised and upset many people. The NIC had always advocated a boycott of the SAIC elections, a pseudo parliament (much like the Coloured Representative Council). and boycotted any activities relating to the SAIC. Now some prominent and active members of the NIC were pushing a new line - 'the boycott must be reassessed'.

Why had the NIC always boycotted SAIC elections? As Mr George Sewpersadh, chairman of the NIC executive recently said:

'It must be understood that the SAIC has been created by and will be under the control of people dedicated to the oppression of blacks. In the circumstances it can only be a machinery of oppression, and not of liberation. A just and democratic society can only be created if we look for and find our own means of achieving our aims'.

He further argued:

'The decision not to be a party to the election of the SAIC was taken several years ago and the NIC sees no change in the political situation to warrant such a change in policy' (1).

Another important reason for non-participation was ex-

pressed by Dr E. Gangat of the Marburg-Port Shepstone Ratepayers and Residents Association when he argued: 'Our true interests can never be served when we speak as one section of the community' (2). The isolation of the SAIC as an Indian body he saw as a serious problem.

The background

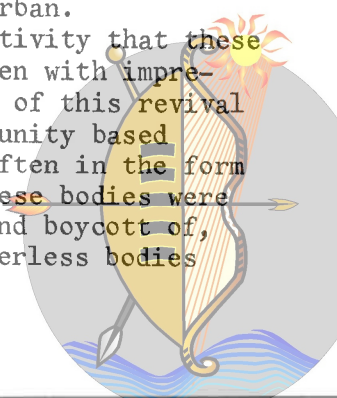
But in order to get a better perspective of the situation it is important to look at the background to the situation.

Many of the so-called 'Indian' student activists who participated in the development of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and related organisations, continued in their political and community activities after they left university. Some of these former students joined the Natal Indian Congress, the organisation which had participated in the Congress Alliance. But, unlike most of those organisations in the alliance, the NIC was not banned, exiled or forced underground. It reconstituted itself, after a period of dormancy, in 1971 as a political association. It remains a widely respected organisation, known to broad sectors of the population despite being constituted on an ethnic basis. Its principles oppose all forms of racism.

The influx of young activists into the organisation over the last few years was welcomed with open arms. It was an important development as the leadership had undergone few changes over the last few years, and the 'old guard' was re-stimulated by the influx.

At the same time some ex-students went into community organisation, and one of the most significant developments in this field was the establishment of the Phoenix Working Committee - in that vast resettled Indian township, Phoenix. A further avenue for activity was the non-racial sports body SACOS, particularly NACOS (the Natal Council of Sport, a subsidiary body of SACOS), being based in Durban.

These were some of the new fields of activity that these intellectuals threw themselves into, and often with impressive results. One, perhaps indirect, effect of this revival of activity was the increased number of community based organisations that emerged in this period, often in the form of ratepayers and residents associations. These bodies were often involved in political opposition to, and boycott of, the Local Advisory Committees (set up as powerless bodies by the Durban municipality).



At the same time the kind of issues taken up by the NIC establishment displayed a certain lack of variety and political inventiveness - mainly being involved in issues of boycott, and reactions to the actions of the state. In these actions it had always taken a principled position and stood committed towards a free, non-racial society. However most of its activities appeared to revolved around the executive committee and extensive grass-roots organisation was largely lacking.

This is not to say that the NIC is inflexible. In fact its adoption of the principles of the South African Council of Sport at a recent congress seemed to be an indication of its flexibility. Of course the position of SACOS on questions like non-participation in apartheid institutions, and those of the NIC committed to similar activities, as well as their common commitment to a free non-racial South Africa, would seem to have made this development fairly painless.

In spite of the developments that had occurred over recent times it was still felt by many people that the level of political awareness and participation of what we will for convenience call that 'Indian community in Natal' was low and underdeveloped. The reasons suggested for this are many and varied and include: the conservatism of the worker organisations of which Indian workers are members; the 'inward-looking' nature of the 'Indian community'; the sometimes strained relations between elements of the Indian and African communities; and the fact that Durban remained relatively untouched by the political ferment of the post-1976 period. These arguments, though they need to be discussed, will not be further discussed here.

Faced with a situation that seemed to have reached its short term limitations - in that, despite the development of sports and community programmes to a certain point, the political development of the broad community was still very limited - some of these intellectuals felt that some form of political intervention, at a very public level, was the right step.

At about the same time an amendment of the Electoral Act for Indians was going through the South African Parliament. One aspect of the amendment was that an organised boycott of the SAIC elections might be prohibited. The immediate response of the vice-president of the NIC, M.J. Naidoo, was to state:

'No self-respecting person could ever consider election to the SAIC if opponents are banned from calling a

boycott of the elections The NIC is totally against the elections, and prospective candidates must know that they are opportunists' (3).

However, by this time, it was already fairly common knowledge that there were certain elements in the NIC and sympathetic organisations who were reconsidering the question of the SAIC boycott. These people, consisted of the leading elements of the group of young intellectuals we have been referring to, as well as some older NIC members regarded as being 'on the left wing' (4). They went about this reassessment by calling small meetings at which the question of participation in the SAIC elections was discussed. Amongst those who accepted invitations to attend these meetings were George Sewpersadh, chairman of the NIC, M.J. Naidoo, vice-chairman and Dr Farouk Meer, also an influential NIC executive member. According to the same newspaper sources, the main organisers of the meetings were Krish Govender, Yunus Mohamed, Shanim Maree and Praveen Gordhan (5).

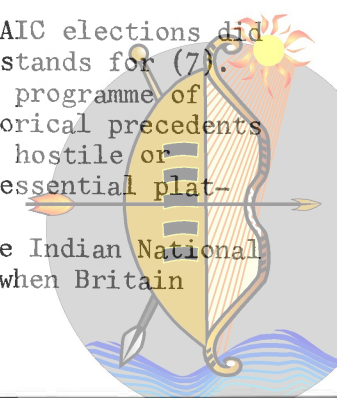
The arguments of the pro-reassessment group, as can be gleaned from the press, were roughly as follows:

- (1) The understood assumption that the general political awareness of the Indian masses (amongst others) was in need of revitalisation.
- (2) The fear that an anti-election campaign could now (in the light of the new amendment) be easily crushed by the state.
- (3) That 'nonentities' (stooges), if allowed to control the SAIC, and were they continually bolstered by the state, might ripen into recognised leaders.
- (4) That the radical opposition could then be easily crushed, not having an equally strong platform, and that it was important to defend the gains already made (6).

Those elected would take none of the (lavish) government salary for themselves, but would donate it to the party (various sources claimed that the name 'Congress Party' had been suggested).

They argued that participation in the SAIC elections did not mean acceptance of the SAIC and what it stands for (7). In a manifesto circulated in support of this programme of action they argued that there were many historical precedents for this kind of action - participation in a hostile or useless forum merely because it provided an essential platform for progressive political arguments.

One example was the participation of the Indian National Congress (of India) in the 1936/7 elections when Britain



the ruling colonial power, offered what Nehru and Gandhi, 'the architects of India's march to freedom', described as a 'slave constitution'. The manifesto argues: 'The Congress election campaign was explained in simple straight forward terms: 'Fight for Indian freedom; build the Congress into a mighty army of the Indian people; organise to remove poverty and unemployment'..

'The Congress', it continues, 'swept the polls and, although Nehru was persuaded to accept office, no-one accused the Congress of 'selling out'.' (8)

Another example referred to was the participation of the Russian Social Democratic Party in the 'toothless Dumas (parliaments)' after the 1905 revolution had failed (9). This was the party that later, under Lenin, won power as the Bolsheviks in the revolution in October 1917 in Russia.

These arguments, at least in the abstract, would seem to have raised some interesting points, points which may have been worthy of discussion amongst political leaders in Durban. They may have, after due analysis of the specific conditions in South Africa in 1979, been rejected; but they nevertheless, as some newspaper commentators pointed out (10), might have stimulated a debate that produced some useful ideas and arguments, even if it was eventually agreed that the old policy was still the most suitable.

However it appears that despite whatever constructive debate occurred, the situation soon lapsed into a vicious public conflict. As one newspaper correctly predicted when the private meetings were disclosed in the press, 'once the new strategy becomes public knowledge it is going to generate a great deal of turbulence in Indian political circles, no doubt accompanied by a fair amount of polemic, invective and public mud slinging' (11).

As we saw earlier, as soon as the debate was made public the NIC leaders launched a heavy attack against the proposals. As we have already quoted (first page of this article), the NIC leaders stated categorically that the NIC would not, and saw no reason to, consider participation in the SAIC elections. The SAIC was an apartheid institution which could only be a mechanism of repression.

In a statement made to the press, M.J. Naidoo presented the main arguments against participation, as seen by the NIC executive (12):

(1) he argued that any attempt to opt for participation would be seen anti-apartheid campaigners overseas as

working within apartheid and would deliver a body blow to 'our exiled leaders campaigning overseas'.

(2) he denied that the SAIC or 'Indian parliament' would ever 'hood wink the oppressed people of South Africa'.

(3) nor did he concede that it was necessary to prove that Indians did not support the stooges,

(4) and he argued that the NIC did not want to be party to candidates making false promises to the electorate;

(5) and they 'refused to be a party to total alienation of radical African sympathy'.

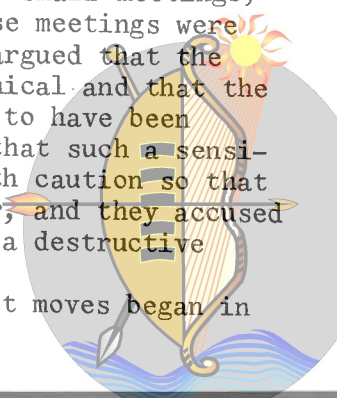
'It is essential', he concluded, 'to know what campaign promises will be made, what the manifesto will contain, and what the ultimate purpose of participation is. If there is going to be a demand for one man one vote for all people including Africans, Coloureds and Indians, if there is going to be a demand for a unitary state based on recognised democratic principles, if there is going to be a demand for the release of political leaders in prison and under restriction orders, and if there is going to be a demand for the repeal of discriminatory legislation, then it must be clear that this is the policy of the group, and they must also make it clear how they intend to carry out their mandate once they enter the Indian Council or Chamber'.

Despite the fact that the statement is phrased very much in 'we' and 'they' terms, it might have been regarded as a constructive contribution to the debate, had it not been preceded by categorically negative statements from the NIC. Some of the arguments contained in the statement are clearly important and worthy of discussion.

But, unfortunately, by that stage the situation had already become one of bitter conflict, and the possibility of constructive discussion seemed quite limited.

The first issue was the manner in which the pro-reassessment group went about canvassing opinion in small meetings, meant to be quite private, and the way these meetings were dramatically disclosed by the press. Some argued that the manner of the original discussion was unethical and that the arguments, and the people involved, ought to have been public from the start (12). Others argued that such a sensitive issue had to be broached initially with caution so that unnecessary misunderstandings did not occur, and they accused the press of sensationalising the issue in a destructive manner.

Once the debate became a public contest moves began in



some quarters to politically ostracise the pro-reassessment group. One out of several examples will serve to illustrate how this was happening.

The Phoenix Working Committee, which has already been mentioned, is the coordinating body of a number of community organisations in the Phoenix area of Durban. Amongst others, Yunus Mohamed and Praveen Gordhan were involved in its establishment and development. They, and others, had held small meetings in Phoenix to discuss the issue of participation in the SAIC. A meeting of the PWC was arranged, in late May, to discuss this question - the question of participation (14). Before the meeting came about there were newspaper reports about attempts which would be made to call on Mohamed and Gordhan to sever all ties with the PWC because of their involvement in campaigning for participation in the SAIC elections. Mr Roy Sukuram, Chairman of the Phoenix Working Committee is reported to have said:

'The people of Phoenix have repeatedly shown...their total rejection of the SAIC...'

'I regard the action of Mr Yunus Mohamed and Mr Praveen Gordhan, who are playing a very prominent role in influencing the people to participate in the SAIC elections, as being very irresponsible, and I will have no further dealings with them' (15).

The two men decided, as they put it, in the interests of unity not to attend the PWC meetings (16). Although they were supported by the majority - and it appeared at the time that this claim was justified (17). The whole situation got blown up very seriously in the newspapers - Mohamed and Gordhan claiming that they had reached an agreement with Sukuram, merely to withdraw from meetings, the latter arguing that this was not true and making very condemnatory statements. He refused to allow the question of participation to be discussed at all at the PWC meeting called to discuss that very question (18). Accusation and counter-accusation flew about and the splits and conflicts received far more publicity than the issues meant to be debated. Mr J.M. Singh, chairman of the Clayfield Residents Association, said after the meeting: 'Judging from the feelings expressed by people at the meeting, there is a definite split in the PWC and it seems it will widen to an extent that the organisation, as it exists today, will be destroyed' (19).

Soon after he barred the meeting from discussing the reassessment question, and was involved in the ejection of

Mohamed and Gordhan, Sukuram was announced to be a member of the 'Anti SAIC Committee' (20). This committee, headed by M.J. Naidoo, has since been involved in a widespread campaign to drum up support for a boycott of the elections.

One of the biggest projects of the Anti-SAIC group is the newly established newspaper called 'The Call'. The first issue (July 6, 1979) carries a number of articles arguing against participation in the elections, now scheduled for March next year, as well as a couple of more general articles providing some background to the political questions. The Call managed to elicit a wide range of support for its campaign from people such as Mr Hassan Howa, president of the South African Cricket Board and SACOS, Dr Nthatho Motlana, leader of the Soweto Committee of Ten, and Mrs Nokukanya Luthuli, widow of Albert Luthuli. As there is little space to do more we will just present an extract from Mrs Luthuli's statement, which is, perhaps, the most interesting one: (21)

'My late husband', she said, 'always acted objectively when assessing a political situation and interpreting the aspirations of the people at every stage of the struggle...He always gave a lead on the basis of the people's needs....'

'In the present political climate in which there is an immense hatred for apartheid and its institutions he would never go against the will of the people to participate in these anachronistic ethnic institutions....'

Conclusion

The debate continues. It appears that the question over participation is still far from settled. Perhaps it is just as well that it continues, for two reasons:

(1) firstly, it is hoped that the amount of animosity and mud-slinging will decline, and that worked out political arguments will eventually be the decisive factor. If that happens it might be possible to heal some of the unnecessary wounds in the various political bodies.

(2) secondly, on the other hand, the debate has had quite an explosive impact on 'Indian politics', stimulating more activity than has existed for many years. Some of the problems of Indian politics, perhaps even the problem that there is 'Indian politics', might have been worked through - and, perhaps, the situation will have advanced since April this year. Perhaps Mr Sewpersadh's statement - that 'the NIC sees no change in the political situation (since 1971) to warrant such a change in policy', will have been thoroughly tested.

Footnotes:

1. The Graphic (weekly newspaper, Durban) 11.5.79
2. The Leader (weekly newspaper, Durban) 25.5.79
3. The Leader 6.4.79
4. The Leader 18.5.79
5. The Graphic 4.5.79, 11.5.79
- 6.
7. The Graphic 18.5.79
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. The Leader 18.5.79, 1.6.79
11. The Leader 4.5.79
12. The Graphic 1.6.79
13. The Leader 18.5.79
14. The Graphic 25.5.79
15. *ibid.*
16. The Leader 1.6.79
17. The Leader 8.6.79
18. The Graphic 1.6.79
19. The Leader 8.6.79
20. *ibid.*
21. The Call 6.7.79.

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