

A MOVEMENT OF UNSKILLED WORKERS

Over the past two years, the Africans workers of Cape Town have learnt that if they are to better their positions they have to be organised and made united demands of their employers. They have learnt that one worker standing alone is powerless, whereas the united workers have power from which to make their demands.

But if this is the case, why is it that all workers do not stand together? In particular, why is there racial separation amongst the workers?

This question is a very complex one - and one which cannot be covered completely in one article. But in order to begin to understand it, we must understand firstly which of the workers have common interests, and secondly, the motives of those who have brought about these racial divisions.

The one single factor which distinguishes workers from others in the society is that the only thing they have from which to make their living is their labour. They do not own the land or the sources of raw materials or the factories. In order to satisfy their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, they must sell their labour to those who own the land or the factories (the capitalists). This factor is common to all workers, be they white, african, coloured or indian.

In selling their labour, they will be trying to get the maximum payment for this labour in the form of wages; while the capitalist will be trying to make the maximum possible profits from their labour, and hence will be trying to pay them the least possible wages.

We see, therefore, that the interests of all workers are basically the same - to get the maximum return on their labour. We also know that these interests are best served by all the workers writing in their demands to the capitalists - it is, therefore, also immediately obvious that it is in the interests of the capitalists to destroy that unity.

All this seems very obvious. Why, then, have the workers become divided? The answer to this lies in two connected factors:-

- i) the divisions between skilled and unskilled workers
- and ii) the exploitation of racial prejudice and fear by those who wish to divide the workers.

We said above that the interests of workers are all basically the same - to get the maximum return on their labour. But, in reality, the interests of the workers are only completely the same if they are all prepared to advance together. If some workers are prepared to advance their interests at the expense of other workers, this obviously divides the workers' united struggle and they begin to fight amongst themselves.

This is the fundamental cause of the first factor mentioned above - the divisions between skilled and unskilled workers. Skilled workers have some form of education and training which allows them to do more

complicated jobs. Because of this, they are more valuable to the capitalist than unskilled workers who have no special training and who are easily replaced. Therefore the skilled worker, if he wants to advance his interests independently of the unskilled worker, will make use of his better bargaining position.

We can also see that this better bargaining position of the skilled worker will only be maintained if the skills remain confined to a few people. Hence the skilled worker also wants to protect himself from the unskilled worker who he sees as a potential threat to his better position.

We therefore see that the interests of the skilled and unskilled workers are not exactly the same, even though both are workers. While the unskilled worker is struggling with his employer, the skilled worker who is also struggling with his employer (because he is a worker), is at the same time looking over his shoulder to see that he is not being threatened by the unskilled worker (because he is skilled).

And all the time, the employer realises that it is in his own interests to have the workers divided, and so encourages the divisions.

In order to illustrate how this all works in practice, let us assume that Mr. Smith is a skilled worker, while Mr Jones is an unskilled worker. As workers, suppose that Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones make united demands on their employer.

But the employer knows that Mr. Smith is more valuable to him than Mr. Jones - he will therefore be more prepared to meet the demands of Mr. Smith than Mr. Jones who can easily be replaced. So he tells Mr. Smith that he is prepared to meet his demands, but that Mr. Jones will have to be happy with his present position. Is Mr. Smith going to say: "No, I won't accept this"? or is he going to advance himself without much concern for Mr. Jones? In most cases, he will do the latter. And we see that the more he does this, the more he becomes allied with the employer rather than with his fellow unskilled worker, Mr. Jones, and the more he comes to feel threatened by Mr. Jones. He feels threatened because, firstly, Mr Jones may be trained to do skilled work as well and, secondly, Mr. Jones has a lot of potential power as an unskilled worker if he unites with all other unskilled workers - Mr. Smith knows that Mr. Jones and his fellow unskilled workers would probably put a stop to his privileged position if they had the power to do so.

We can see how he has responded to this threat by looking at the role which trade unions have played in South Africa. These unions initially consisted only of skilled workers - their role was to advance the position of the skilled workers in the struggle against employers and to protect their position from being threatened by the unskilled worker.

So what do we see from all the above?

The most striking thing is that the racial question (which so many people say is at the root of the divisions amongst workers) is not a fundamental cause of the divisions at all. It does not matter

whether the employer, skilled worker or unskilled worker are white, black or coloured - the fundamental divisions are based on their interests as employers, skilled or unskilled workers, NOT on their race.

The racial question has entered the problem in South Africa largely as a result of the political history of the country where the capitalists and skilled workers were initially the whites who held political power and who used this political power to advance their interests at the expense of the unskilled (black) workers. It is impossible to go into the historical process in this article - another whole article is necessary. But it is enough to realise that the racial divisions are not fundamental divisions and that interests of all unskilled workers are basically the same, that the interests of all skilled workers are basically the same, and that the interests of all capitalists are basically the same.

Once this is understood, the direction which must be taken by the movement of unskilled African workers is quite clear. It must not remain a movement of African workers, but must become a movement of unskilled workers, while at the same time not forgetting those skilled workers who wish to be united with the unskilled workers.

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