

LABOUR ARISTOCRATS

AND

AFRICAN WORKERS

by David Hemson

In the past few weeks there has been considerable debate about the relation of registered trade unions towards the mass of workers in South Africa: African workers. Once again TUCSA (The Trade Union Congress of South Africa) has called upon the Government to change its attitude towards the organisation of African workers. But on this occasion there were discordant voices among the progressive unions, and in an interview with David Hemson, Mrs. Harriet Bolton Secretary of the Garment Workers Industrial Union (Natal) traces the history of the relationship between TUCSA and African workers. Trade unions should deregister in terms of the racial Industrial Conciliation Act and new worker's organisations should be formed, she argues.

What were your general impressions of the latest TUCSA Conference?

For the first time I felt that we had come to a stalemate. All the resolutions and discussions seemed to be the same as in previous years. Many of the delegates complained on the first and second days that Conference was completely dead, and said how little progress had been made since last year.

The main item under discussion, I take it, was the question of the organisation of African workers?

This was definitely the most important item on the agenda, but unfortunately the resolution was delayed and had to be dealt with after the seminar on African Trade unions addressed by Dr. van der Merwe and Dr. Francis Wilson, which was on the fourth day.

The resolution was more or less a standard resolution as passed at previous conferences?

The actual resolution read as follows: 'This 18th Annual Conference calls on all affiliated unions of the Council to make every effort to obtain from their members an unambiguous and clear mandate, in the coming year, to press Government to permit the organising of African workers into registered trade unions in their respective industries and occupations for which they cater.'

I feel strongly that this resolution should have been put into practice in 1966. At the 15th Annual Conference that year, Mr. Scheepers, President of TUCSA, gave his reasons why we would have to change our policy on African trade unions from acceptance to rejection. 'You will recall that at the Special Conference held in 1967 to decide on the prickly question of non-registered unions, it was decided to recommend to affiliates that the Council limit its membership to registered trade unions. Many of the delegates to the Special Conference refrained from casting their votes and were instructed to go back to their unions to seek a clear mandate on the issue, so that they could vote on the matter when it arose at last year's annual conference.

NO MANDATE

'I am sorry to say, fellow trade unionists, that many of these delegates failed to obtain mandates. There was much lobbying before the vote to reverse the decision of the Special Conference, but this vote, I am quite certain, was *not based on a firm mandate from the unions concerned*, so much as on emotional, on-the-spot decisions.'

TUCSA became alienated from a large body of registered trade unions and from the Government, and the officials claimed that African workers were not industrially conscious.

At that time we were told by Conference to get a mandate, which I and others did, but some unions did not. What guarantee have we got that they will do so this time?

What is the purpose of getting a mandate?

A mandate would show that you are empowered by your unions to take a vote. I do not see the necessity for TUCSA to ask delegates to obtain a mandate from their workers, because you as a delegate are fully aware of how far you can go.

The position is as follows then: that the trade unions realise that something has to be done about African workers. The Minister of Labour has been approached, but he has refused to allow African workers to become members of a registered trade union. Conference then considers the position and puts forward yet another resolution which is identical to that turned down by the Minister the year before?

That is correct. This procedure gives the impression that we are doing something about it at last. In 1966 our leaders said it was the correct thing to do and some unions did have the required mandate. At the next conference our leaders said it was not the right thing to do, because some unions had left TUCSA in reaction to accepting African unions.

REJECTED SUGGESTIONS

In the first place TUCSA had the previous year taken many resolutions similar to those appearing on this year's agenda. The National Executive Committee resolution on African workers was similar to that of last year. But last year the Secretary for Labour flatly rejected TUCSA's suggestions. And I quote: 'I am directed to advise you that the Government has announced *time and again* that it is not prepared to amend the Industrial Conciliation Act to permit of the recognition of Bantu trade unions, and the Minister of Labour recently reiterated in Parliament that it is not intended to grant official recognition to such unions. In the circumstances no purpose would be served by pursuing the matter any further.'

The leaders of TUCSA inferred that they had the position under control and they implied that they had 'something up their sleeves', but in that case they should have told delegates exactly what it was. In fairness to them, they might have thought that by giving unions this issue to discuss they might engender action amongst them.

Industrial legislation in South Africa then does not really protect and encourage genuine trade unions?

If you examine the basic principles of the labour movement and the provisions of industrial legislation you will find that they differ immensely. In the early days (in 1924 just after the trade union movement had become active) it should not have accepted the qualification that Africans should be excluded from union membership. Of course, at that time there were far fewer African industrial workers. But when industrial legislation was amended by the National Government in 1956 to bring in job reservation, prohibit strikes, and cause racial discrimination within trade unions the trade union movement should have made a decisive stand.

At that time was there no move to de-register?

There were people who said that unions' might as well de-register but there was no move to actually do this. The trade unions fought against the Bill, but when the amendments became law they had no option but to send in their constitutions to be rewritten in terms of the new legislation. Because trade unions are having to keep within industrial law, and because the Government makes ideologically reactionary legislation, the remaining trade unions are stultifying and dying.

The bulk of the workers have no vote. When trade unions were first formed they consisted mainly of white workers who had votes. A large body of voters in the country wanted a trade union movement and were in fact members of a trade union, and therefore assumed that the Government would take notice of their pleas.

NO VOTES

Since an increased number of voteless blacks have come into industry the trade union movement has not had the same force. Although the numbers of members have increased, the percentage of the voting population in the trade union movement has decreased. Trade unions will fall away in the end because the bulk of the workers will be Africans. If you study the Transvaal Garment Union and the Engineering Union you'll find that the number of workers have doubled but those with votes have decreased. This results in trade unions being eroded.

At the TUCSA conference you felt that the trade unions were getting nowhere and that they should de-register in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act?

There is a feeling among registered unions that African workers are not equipped to run their own trade unions. This has actually been said. In 1969 Mr. Scheepers, then



President of TUCSA said: 'The question boiled down to this; that it was in the interests of South Africa as a whole that its hundreds of thousands of unorganised workers should be offered facilities for obtaining *responsible* leadership. That was the argument and it won sufficient support for our Constitution to be amended in 1962 to permit the affiliation of non-registered unions. The door was now open but what has happened in the intervening years? 'Only eleven comparatively small non-registered unions walked through that door in all those years. TUCSA, in that period, had an African Affairs Department which devoted time and energy to assist the African workers in sectors where this help was called for in the broad interests of *all* South African workers.'

I feel that the impression was given that African workers were not industrially conscious. In other words, they were not worth worrying about. That is the opinion of most of the trade unions. They feel that Africans can only succeed if helped by white unions, because they are not capable of running their own organisations.

SAME DIFFICULTIES

I felt annoyed because after all in the early days all trade unions had the same difficulties. Many trade unions still have inadequate leadership. Most of them pass the buck on to their industrial councils and take refuge in the fact that if their employers do not agree to their requests they can do nothing about it.

How many of these trade unions, if they were not registered would have been able to maintain their position? If trade unions de-register and amalgamate with the bulk of the *workers* and either form associations or some kind of united body, or whatever they expect the Africans to do, and have a go at uniting with the Africans and just ignore the

provisions of the Industrial Conciliation Act, then we will have made some progress.

The employers maintain industrial councils because they have gained control over the unions. They have learnt to make industrial councils control the unions, and how to operate the industrial machinery. Industrial councils have become a means of control rather than of assistance to trade unions.

If trade union leaders were agreeable to de-registration would they get the support of their members? Do you think it would be possible to negotiate agreements which would be legally binding?

How did trade unions get the support of their members in the early days when there was no legislation? There were trade unions in South Africa before the 20th century and most industrial legislation only came into effect in 1924. It may be a bit difficult to convince our members at first, but no more than it was in the early days. If it was brought home to workers individually that they must cast their lot with other workers they would be agreeable. If this racial problem was put in perspective people would be able to see clearly beyond the barriers that the law makes.

What was the response of the trade unions and TUCSA leaders to your suggestions?

The idea was so new that they did not even consider it, they did not even hear me. Only the distributive union came to me and pointed out that they felt that it was compulsory for trade unions to be registered. I asked them how Africans could run an organisation without being registered. I explained to them how societies could be registered. I feel that if all the workers were 100 per cent organised and belonged to a benefit society it could work.

When I was negotiating for my union's agreement I found

that the individual employers were willing to negotiate separately and willing to deduct the workers' contributions and send them in to the union. If any employer would refuse we would see that he did not get labour.

STALEMATE

TUCSA has reached a stalemate. There are going to be other unions as dissatisfied as ours, for instance the Typographical Union. At this last conference TUCSA's strength was 76 unions and 189 000 workers. The affiliated strength was more or less the same now as it was in December 1947. There were more unions affiliated then when there were less people in industry in South Africa. I do not think that TUCSA has made any real commendable progress. We have become merely a focal point for resolutions asking the Government to do certain things, the Government then refuses to do these things, and then we stop. There is nothing more we can do. That is why I feel we should now examine the effectiveness of different forms of organisation.

I feel unions should show their wishes to the Minister by organising African workers by de-registering their unions and forming other kinds of association which will take in all workers. I think that this action will bring such chaos that it will force radical rethinking.

It is a myth that industrial legislation protects us, it actually restricts us. Unions are registered in terms of laws which are fundamentally in conflict with the principles of the labour movement.

I believe that if we do make a mass move to de-register, first of all examining how we could form other organisations with a workable constitution, we could still negotiate contracts with employers individually and set up main collection offices — and work out something in that way. □

FROM THE OUTSIDE

by M. Pascal Gwala

We buried Madaza
on a Sunday;
big crowd:
hangarounds, churchgoers,
drunks and goofs;
even the fuzz
was there
as the priest
hurried
the burial sermon-
and we filled the grave
with red soil,
the mourning song
pitched fistedly high;
— what got my brow itching though
is that none
of the cops present
dared to stand out
and say
Madaza was a "Wanted" □