

## Southern Africa

# SOUTH AFRICAN CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS

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**T**HIS month is the seventeenth anniversary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions. It was formed on March 5, 1955, in Johannesburg, South Africa, started with a few affiliated trade unions consisting mainly of Africans, and by 1965 it had 53 affiliated trade unions with a membership of 55,000.

The aims of the South African Congress of Trade Unions were to serve the interests of all workers, irrespective of race, colour or creed. These aims were confirmed by the first conference held in Cape Town in 1956. The majority of the affiliated trade unions of SACTU were African; this was not due to any discriminatory policy on the part of SACTU, but to the fact that it is the African worker who is not covered by any recognised trade union federation and has no negotiating machinery in any industry in South Africa. This is so despite the fact that African workers comprise about 70 per cent of the total labour force.

For their opposition to apartheid and discrimination, the leadership and activists of SACTU and its affiliated trade unions were arbitrarily arrested, banned and removed from their trade union offices by restrictions and police intimidation of the workers. Some sympathetic employers, who allowed the workers to hold meetings in their premises, and some landlords who allowed African trade unionists to have offices in their premises, were threatened by the police with refusal to renew their licenses. Some of the trade union leadership still labour under house arrest, others serve life imprisonment, and others are in exile.

The more the economy of South Africa has developed, the more new laws have been enacted to restrict the African workers and to deny them the same rights which white workers in South Africa enjoy. After the general strike of 1922 the South African Government made a new law allowing all other workers to form recognised trade unions: the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924. This includes a

clause which recognises workers under the definition 'employees'. Only those workers who were *not* pass-bearers were covered by this definition 'employees'. They had the right to organise, to join a trade union of their choice, to form trade unions and negotiate with the employers on behalf of their members. Because African males were pass-bearers, they were automatically excluded by this definition of 'employees'.

Despite this repression, a number of trade unions from 1928 onward were formed: the Clothing Workers' Union, the African Laundry Workers' Union, the African Bakers' Union and, in 1937, the African Engineering Workers' Union. These unions did have offices in the industrial areas and had round-table discussions with the employers and negotiated for their members. They were strong, militant trade unions. In most cases they negotiated from strength. This of course the Government did not like.

After the second world war, the second new wave of industrial development came about. Again many Africans, as they returned from the war, joined the few others who were already in the labour field in South Africa. They spread into many cities and industrial areas. Here again new legislation, known as the Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act of 1952, was passed, imposing further restrictions on the movements of African men and women.

Here one can mention but few of the laws which were introduced: the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956, one clause of which was on job reservation. This Act was more vicious than the first Industrial Conciliation Act because it separated the trade unions on racial lines. Even sympathetic unions would not, after this Act was passed, accept the functioning of the African trade unionists in their offices. Since African trade unions are not recognised as such, they cannot register under the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956. 'Job reservation' reserves certain jobs for whites only. The Native Settlement of Disputes Act, denies the African workers the right to take part in any form of strike, carrying with it a fine of £500 or three years in jail for an African worker who participates in a strike. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 in fact regards anyone who opposes apartheid as a Communist. Many African trade unionists had already been removed from their trade union offices under this Act.

Discrimination in employment also grew as the economy expanded. In 1893 the Transvaal Volksraad enacted a law prohibiting the Africans, Asians, and Coloureds from performing blasting operations—a major occupation in mining. In 1896 and 1897 further

laws were passed reserving other mining jobs (work done by banksmen, onsetters and winding-engine drivers) for qualified whites only. When the British annexed the Transvaal in 1902 these laws were retained, and after Union in 1910 the statutory colour bar in mining was embodied in the Mines and Works Act of 1911, which empowered the Governor-General to make regulations for the issue of certificates of competency in skilled occupations in mining and engineering. Under these regulations, non-whites in the Transvaal and Orange Free State could not be granted certificates.

In 1923 the courts declared the regulations *ultra vires* but in 1926 a new 'Pact' government (Labour Party-Nationalist Party alliance) amended the law to reverse the court decision and restore the colour bar. Thereafter, certificates for engine driving, blasting, surveying and other skilled occupations in the mines were again denied to Africans (see *South African Workers under Apartheid* by Alex Hepple). To this Act the Nationalists added a second in 1951, on the building industry. The Bantu Building Works Act of 1951 prohibited the Africans from doing skilled building work in white areas.

White workers are now being recruited from Europe to come and work and settle in southern Africa. These workers are allowed to bring their families, with the aim of settling in any part of southern Africa, but Africans who are being recruited from the rural areas in South Africa and also from Mozambique, Malawi, Botswana, Lesotho all come as migratory labourers, having to remain on a temporary basis, without their families.

British and other European workers who refuse to go and work in South Africa do so not only on the grounds that they will be taking away jobs that belong by right to the Africans; they are also refusing to go and settle in South Africa and bolster up apartheid and discriminatory policies whose aims and purpose are to put the Africans under perpetual domination. This solidarity on the part of the British workers is highly appreciated by our people who see the stand taken by the national unions, trades councils and the TUC on their opposition to the sale of arms to South Africa, on the boycott of South African sport, the boycott of South African goods, and the campaign to stop emigration to South Africa.

Here I can mention only a few national unions. The National Union of Mineworkers continues to campaign against the emigration of mineworkers to South Africa. The Miners' International Federation has appealed to all its affiliates to express their opposition to the recruitment of European workers to work in South Africa.

Attempts were also made to recruit bus drivers from this country by the Johannesburg City Council; this was strongly condemned by the Transport and General Workers' Union in London and by the International Transport Workers' Federation, which also has its office in London. The Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers Technical and Supervisory Section (at that time DATA), at their National Annual Conference in May last year, carried overwhelmingly a strongly-worded composite motion which included a clause instructing the Executive to support any worker who refused to work on arms contracts. In May and June last year South Africa made another attempt to recruit workers from a broad range of jobs in the printing industry. The unions concerned in this country urged members not to accept such positions.

The campaign on arms, emigration and investments received a tremendous boost from the decision taken at the 1971 TUC Conference. Motions submitted by the Musicians' Union, Chemical Workers' Union and Tobacco Workers' Union, with an amendment by DATA, were included in a strongly-worded composite motion which Congress adopted unanimously. The motion included opposition to the sale of arms to South Africa, support for workers who black arms, a call for the withdrawal of all union investments in firms with South African interests and, also a decision to give moral and material support to the liberation movements who are struggling against apartheid and discrimination, and the breaking of trade union links with white-only trade unions in South Africa.

We are aware that the battle is in South Africa and it is the African workers who must themselves struggle for the achievement of democratic rights in their own country. While this is so, it is important to realise that Vorster gets political, military and economic support from the supporters of apartheid in Britain. The African people will win, but before they win their struggle they need friends indeed, to whom they will say, after they have achieved their freedom: 'During our struggle you stood at our side.' This will undoubtedly create bonds of friendship between the workers of this country and those workers who are struggling for their rights in the southern part of Africa.

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