

# THE WEST AND SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNIONISM



**Jonathan Bloch and Barry Cohen**

The South African working class represents a unique process in the history of Africa. Because South Africa developed a much higher level of productive forces than occurred elsewhere on the continent, the creation of a massive African proletariat has been a crucial feature in the evolution of the state. Throughout this century, the country's ruling class has felt compelled to base its political calculations on the constantly expanding presence of African workers in the cities and rural areas.

With the discovery of gold and diamonds in the nineteenth century, the South African economy was hurled into the international capitalist system. In particular, investment by foreign capital since the 1920s into the manufacturing sector led to the growth of a large urban working class. Due to the super-exploitation of cheap and poorly organised black labor, foreign capitalists enjoyed returns on their investment which ranked among the highest in the world. At the same time, the increasing integration of the country's economy with world capitalism made it increasingly subject to the vagaries

of the world market and the influence of the major imperialist powers.

Apartheid is fundamentally a system for the control of black labor. Extraordinary wealth extracted from the virtual forced labor of Africans enabled the ruling class to accord special privileges to the white working class and, in this way, to obtain its collaboration. Yet, in the face of massive state repression exercised by the South African state, black workers have continually waged struggles to improve their most elementary living conditions. Both foreign and domestic capital have long realised that their substantial wealth and investments would be threatened if they failed to contain the development of a militant black trade union movement.

## **Post-war developments**

Shortly after the assumption of power by the National Party in 1948, the government embarked on implementing one of its main political goals of smashing the organised



sections of the working class. In 1953, it introduced the Native Labor Act which denied official recognition to African trade unions and declared all strikes by African workers to be illegal. In a further extension of apartheid logic, the Act prohibited unions with white, colored and Asian members from accepting African workers. In this way, the government hoped to complete the segregation of South Africa's working class. The capitulation of the registered unions to this legislation was to exert a lasting impact on the class struggle in South Africa.

Concomitant with the state's attack on African trade union rights, the international labor movement started to become involved in the organisation of South African workers. In 1963, the British Trades Union Congress paid its first visit to South Africa. Realising that Britain has always been the largest overseas investor in the country's economy, the TUC has historically articulated a chauvinistic policy towards black workers. It has firmly believed that black militancy must be defused in order to protect important British investments and trade.

The TUC had given its support to the South African Trade and Labour Council (SATLC) which included African members in the 1940s. After its visit, the TUC delegation recommended that "in the greater interest and urgent necessity of unity", the white trade unions should apply apartheid. The TUC, therefore, was instrumental in killing SATLC in favor of a South African Trade Union Council which excluded Africans. This body was later reorganised as the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) and has always maintained close ties with the TUC.

In March 1955, the non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was formed. Derived from dissident SATLC unions along with the Council of Non-European Unions, it was tied to the Congress Alliance whose main organisational form was the African National Congress. SACTU emerged as the only trade union organisation which stressed the interaction between political and economic issues.

Western imperialist interests and a section of the -African petit bourgeoisie were

unhappy about the political direction which SACTU and the ANC were taking. In 1958, two representatives of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) visited South Africa to establish closer ties with the unions there. They advised SACTU to break its ties with the ANC and the communist-backed World Federation of Trade Unions. When SACTU refused to do so, the ICFTU branded it "communist" and refused to lend any support to SACTU's campaign to organise African workers.

In the meantime, the Americans were actively involved in splitting the ANC, and by 1959, their efforts contributed to the creation of the rival Pan-Africanist Congress. In the trade union sphere, the Federation of Free African Trade Unions (FOFATUSA) was founded in late 1959 by various African unions which had not affiliated to SACTU. FOFATUSA was closely allied with the PAC and strongly in opposition to SACTU. It proclaimed: "We are interested in industrial politics and the welfare of the worker and not in party politics".

FOFATUSA was directly affiliated with the ICFTU which provided it with £30,000 in funds. By 1962, it had twenty affiliated unions and approximately 36,000 members. Following the decision taken by TUCSA in 1962 to permit the affiliation of "properly constituted" African unions, some of the largest unions in FOFATUSA decided to apply for affiliation with TUCSA. Partly because of this development and also because some of its founding unions had ceased to exist, FOFATUSA's strength declined. Finally, in 1966, it was disbanded and its remaining unions were advised to affiliate to TUCSA. Its first president, Jacob Nyaose, established an "exile headquarters" in Ethiopia where he engaged in various reformist activities. In TUCSA's view, "Mr. Nyaose is known as an intense South African patriot and, during his years in exile, consistently counselled Black Africa to seek change in the Republic through persuasion and contact rather than confrontation". (1)

Meanwhile, SACTU which probably reached its peak in 1961 with over 53,000 members and 46 unions, suffered increasing repression. In particular, its leadership was

either banned, exiled or murdered. By the mid-1960s its internal organisation had seriously declined and in 1967, it decided to go underground. It currently receives funds from the WFTU, some East European governments, the World Council of Churches and Dutch trade unions. Furthermore, SACTU is the only trade union movement recognised by the International Labor Organisation. Although some of SACTU's members died in detention following the political upheavals of 1976, it is beginning to show signs of internal revival.

### The quiet 1960s

The decade of the 1960s was essentially a period when workers' struggles in South Africa were in relative abeyance. The numerous Sharpeville events of 1960 produced a deep demoralisation among the non-European sectors of the working class. Like other capitalist economies, South Africa experienced the tremendous economic expansion of this boom period. The absence of independent trade unions gave the state the power to dispose of labor in any manner it wished to do so. Imperialist states considered South Africa to be not only an exceptionally good investment area, but also a valuable bastion for the preservation of western interests in an inherently unstable region. (2) As a result, the South African government felt very confident and acted accordingly.

The most notable western involvement in the trade union sphere during this period originated from Germany. The DGB, the German national trade union federation, became active in the mid-1960s when it established close links with TUCSA. It helped TUCSA create an African Affairs section to deal with research, public relations, and trade union organising among African workers.

TUCSA aimed to weaken support for any trend towards a political movement among the workers. It constantly stressed an anti-communist line and urged black trade unions to avoid political involvement. For example, TUCSA opposed all forms of international boycotts of South African goods.

In a number of cases, trade unions were set up in opposition to existing SACTU unions. For instance, the Sheetmetal Workers' Union, now called the Engineering and Allied Workers' Union, was given the fullest

support. The cautious organisational program coupled with considerable African suspicion of its motives made African trade unions organised by TUCSA rather weak. In addition, the costs of organising were very high. The British TUC calculated that TUCSA was spending 45 Rand for each trade union member that it recruited. Given these costs, it is clear that the organising program was only made possible with the support of the DGB.

Today, German involvement assumes a somewhat different organisational form. The German government funnels money through a German Catholic Development Fund, Misereor, to the Urban Training Project in Johannesburg. More significantly, the Freidrich Ebert Stiftung has become involved in southern African trade unionism. High-ranking members of the Social Democratic Party constitute its board of directors while its financing derives from government, unions, and even business. When the SPD is in power, the Ebert Stiftung is reportedly used by the German intelligence network. (3) During periods of CDU/CSU rule, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation plays a similar role. Information about their activities is extremely difficult to obtain. However, between 1963 and 1972, the Ebert, Adenauer and the Free Democratic Party's Neumann Foundation received over 269 million DM, mainly provided by the German ministry for economic co-operation.

### Eruption in the 1970s

The apparent order and stability of the apartheid system was shaken during the 1970s when black workers began to assert themselves in the face of deteriorating living conditions. Mass strikes, like those manifested in 1973 by 100,000 workers in Durban signalled the start of a new era in black militancy. These were followed by two general strikes in 1976.

The state has tried to contain this threat by two basic means. Firstly, it has enforced the Bantu Labor Relations Act of 1973 limiting legally recognised organisation of African workers to the factory floor. Secondly, the state has reacted brutally against striking workers and their leadership; in 1976, 24 trade union leaders were banned.

Corresponding with this upsurge in militant activity, came an intensified involvement by

various western trade union organisations. An important institutional conduit to pursue their goals emerged through the creation of the Urban Training Project (UTP) in Johannesburg.

The UTP was formed in 1971 out of the ashes of the African Affairs Department of TUCSA which had collapsed in 1969. It aimed to help the struggling black trade unions which had survived their dumping by TUCSA and to extend the government-sanctioned worker committee system. Leading UTP figures, such as Eric Tyacke and Loet Dekker, had previously worked in TUCSA's African Affairs Department.

From their inception, UTP associated unions have been characterised by an explicitly "non political stance" and have sought accommodation within the worker committee system. In 1973, however, the UTP modified its position on worker committees, regarding them now as complementary to, rather than as a substitute for, trade unions, after pressure from the workers.

The UTP has always opposed illegal strike action. In 1976, none of the UTP unions participated in the mass work stoppages or issued statements in support of them. Furthermore, the UTP has consistently opposed economic boycotts of South Africa, arguing that foreign firms could play a "valuable role" by raising wages and recognising African unions.

UTP leadership has encouraged its assisted unions to forge links with the "free" labor movement. In its 1976 annual report, it noted that "it is hoped that this encouraging trend whereby black union leaders can visit and study the union movement in other countries will continue".

In February 1978, a UTP delegation, including Clement Moutsho and Leonard Sikhakhane attended the AFL-CIO conference in Los Angeles. They told the American unionists that any withdrawal of foreign capital from South Africa would primarily harm the black population. An AFL-CIO resolution of support for SACTU was withdrawn when the UTP leaders strongly objected to it. They managed to convince the conference that SACTU was insignificant and only operated from its London exile headquarters.

The true political nature of the UTP emerged following the restriction of its leaders in November 1976. In several statements, it stressed UTP's moderating influence over workers and the dangers that lay ahead for the status quo because of the government's action. In its 1976 annual report, it declared: "If individuals who operate within the South African system of law (i.e. the UTP administrators) continue to be banned, surely the authorities must realise that they are instrumental in bringing about economic and political chaos. They should know that there are elements (i.e. SACTU and other leftwing groups) waiting for such opportunities where black workers can be used to further their aims and objects .... UTP and the Black unions (associated with UTP) are first and foremost concerned with the building up of a healthy relationship (i.e. a non-conflict one) with the employers".\*

Not surprisingly, given UTP's extremely mild political perspective, it has received valuable funding from western sources. These have included the International Metalworkers' Federation; the German Catholic Fund (Misereor); the British TUC; Netherlands Reformed Churches; SOSV — the Dutch Trade Union Federation for International Development Co-operation; SVEA — the Swiss Federation of Christian Trade Unions; and CNV — the Dutch Confederation of Christian Trade Unions. All UTP-assisted unions are affiliated to the appropriate International Trade Secretariats which, in turn, are very closely allied to the ICFTU.

The intensified struggles of black workers during the 1970s attracted the interest of the American labor movement. The AFL-CIO was already well prepared to deal with issues of African trade unionism. In 1964, it had established the African-American Labor Centre in New York which carries out various programs in 41 African states. Its first executive director, until 1974, (3) was Irving Brown who had played an important and highly controversial role on behalf of American imperialism since World War II. Originally recruited into the Labor Branch of the Office of Strategic Services — the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency — Brown carried out the crucial task of splintering the opposition of communist unions to postwar Marshall Aid in France

and Italy. In his book *Inside the Company: A CIA Diary*, Philip Agee identifies Brown as the "principal CIA agent for control of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)". (4) During the pre-independence era in Africa, Brown was a major instrument of the ICFTU throughout the continent in helping nationalist movements in waging political opposition to European colonialism.

Worried about the radicalisation of southern Africa due to the racist policies of the white regimes, Brown warned the US Congress in 1973: "Unless we of the 'Free World' can condemn and fight African apartheid, there is real danger that liberal and non-communist forces will be unable to cope in the future with the situation through lack of support and may be superseded completely by the totalitarian forces of both sides. This will increase the chances of opening the door to the very forces which the makers of US foreign policy claim is threatening the peace of the world, in so-called 'Wars of National Liberation'."

Since the withdrawal of the AFL-CIO from the ICFTU in 1969 because of the latter's insufficient anti-communist fervor, the US has pursued its own independent strategy in regard to South African trade unionism. The AALC has generally opposed South Africa's expulsion from the United Nations as well as international boycotts and campaigns for the withdrawal of foreign investment.

At TUCSA's 19th Annual Conference in 1973, Brown declared that "large funds" from the AFL-CIO would be forthcoming if proper trade unions for blacks were to be allowed. The AALC claims to have "been a constant and vocal critic of the whole concept of the repressive and inhuman apartheid system". (5) However, in 1976, the AFL-CIO refused to take part in the international boycott against South Africa called by the ICFTU on the grounds that similar actions were not planned against the communist bloc. At the same time, Jerry Funk, (6) deputy director of the AALC, testified before the US Senate — much to the delight of South African government propagandists — that the AFL-CIO "recognises that .... a total economic boycott may hurt first and most lastingly the very people you want to help, the black, colored and Asian workers". (7)

By late 1977, however, the AFL-CIO was forced to take account of the gathering political storms in southern Africa. Its convention urged President Carter to put "intense pressure" on South Africa and Rhodesia to end apartheid. At an AFL-CIO executive meeting in February 1978, president George Meany described South Africa as a "destabilising force" because its repressive policies were encouraging Soviet-Cuban penetration in Africa. The executive called on American corporations in South Africa to recognise all "bona fide" trade unions and even urged US sanctions if milder action failed to achieve sufficient reforms.

Yet the AALC continues to work against any radicalisation of black trade unionism. In October 1978 it convened a meeting on Botswana in order to give moderate South African trade unions an international forum. Despite the opposition of the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity, African delegates from Kenya, Liberia, Saire, Togo, Zambia, Lesotho and Botswana attended. The meeting resulted in a big split in Pan-African trade unionism, largely because of AALC's resistance to any recognition of SACTU.

In a parallel manner, the US government has stepped up its activities in the South African labor field. In a "confidential" telex message sent by the US Embassy in Cape Town, in February 1976, to various US missions in Africa, it was stated: "In South Africa, (US) Embassy would give first priority to the labor field", in terms of training black South Africans. At least 16 South African unionists have visited the US in the last five years from the ranks of the Urban Training Project and TUCSA. (8)

The US Labor Attache at the Consulate-General in Johannesburg has a key role to play in the overall scheme. According to the State Department "it is important that the Labor Officer expand his contact with unregistered black unions .... and various groups involved in upgrading the skills of black workers .... and keep in close contact with the white-controlled labor organisations in order to encourage liberal elements". (9) At least, one labor attache who has served in Johannesburg has been named as a CIA agent. He is Ed McHale who was labor attache in Johannesburg in 1972. He

was unmasked during the CIA scandal in Australia in 1977. (10)

When disaffected unions associated with TUCSA and unregistered unions were considering the organisation of a new black trade union federation, they arranged their first meeting at the US Information Service's Library in Johannesburg. Much to the dismay of certain delegates, they were confronted with a film and a lecture by a State Department official on American unionism.

Western imperialism is searching for a "middle force" in its South African strategy to contain revolution while liberalising the apartheid system. As the crisis deepens, the position of the African working class will be crucial in determining the outcome of the contending political forces in South African society. Western governments, and in particular the US, are clearly aware that the formation of a moderate pro-western trade union movement for blacks will be essential in preserving overall western interests in South Africa.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *Labour Mirror*, July 1975.
2. See *L'Afrique Australe: De Kissinger a Carter* by Barry Cohen and Howard Schissel, Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1977.
3. *Private Eye* (London), April 20, 1976.
4. *Where Were You Brother?* by Don Thomson and Rodney Larson, London: War on Want, 1978. p. 29.
5. *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* by Philip Agee. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975, p. 603.
6. *AALC Reporter*, March 1977.
7. Funk formerly worked on the research and publication staff of the International Federation of Petroleum and Chemical Workers. In the mid-1970s, this federation was dissolved when it was revealed to be a front for the CIA.
8. *South Africa Digest*, November 12, 1976.
9. US Senate sub-committee on African Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations, Second Session, 1976, p. 762.
10. *The CIA's Australian Connection*, written and published by Denis Freney, Sydney, Australia.