

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Reaction at Work in South African Trade Unionism.

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The year 1927 has proved in many respects to be a year of shattered hopes for South African workers. Hopes placed by the white workers in sympathetic treatment from the Nationalist Labour Pact Government have everywhere been subjected to ever-growing disillusionment. Hopes of the native workers in the ability of their organisations to put up a fight for their demands have been doomed to bitter disappointment. Throughout the course of the year the forces of reaction have grown and consolidated themselves whilst working class organisations have had to suffer not a few damaging blows from the hands of both internal and external enemies.

Following in the footsteps of the Smuts' regime, the Pact Government has expended a great deal of energy along the lines of rendering the organisations of the workers impotent. On all sides the machinery of class peace and conciliation has been tightened up until practically the whole of white trade unionism has been dragged into its clutches. The industrial organisations of the white workers have been reduced to the position of weapons without a sting, with their leading officials in the majority of cases quite content to confine their efforts to having an amicable talk on affairs with the masters across the top of a table.

Even with this state of affairs predominating however, the apostles of class peace remain dissatisfied. There is a fly in their ointment of class harmony. As is well known the trade unions of the white workers in S. Africa are organisations of a labour aristocracy which refuse to have any truck with the native workers. Despite this fact a number of known communists hold position on the Trade Union Congress national executive where they do not hesitate to propagate a militant class outlook. Their presence on this important body has long proved a thorn in the side of the jingoes but one for which time and again they could find no remedy. This year the reactionaries resorted to an attempt to get the militants (particularly the Secretary, the communist Andrews) ousted from a position of importance in the trade union world. This attempt took the form of an underhand and dastardly attack on the very existence the T. U. C. itself.

Strings were pulled here and there, and soon a number of reactionary intrigues made their appearance in various unions. These culminated in demands being pushed forward for a ballot on the question of continuance of affiliation to the T. U. C. Great play was made with the fact that the congress had passed resolutions of sympathy with the Chinese revolution condemning imperialist intervention, etc., and had also sent greetings to the native workers' organisation at its last congress. A ballot was taken in the A. S. W., the Boilermakers Union, and the Ironmoulders Union, but much to the discomfiture of its promoters resulted in a decision on the part of these bodies to still remain affiliated. In one instance however, success crowned the efforts of the wreckers and they were able to get the A. E. U. to vote in favour of discontinuing its affiliation fees, thus pulling out from T. U. C. membership. The loss of the A. E. U. which is one of the biggest unions in the country has dealt a blow to the stability of the T. U. C.'s position financially and otherwise, and to a certain extent has jeopardised its capacity to carry on active work in the future. Affiliation of other unions in many respects sympathetic to the Trade Union Congress to fill the gap created by the A. E. U.'s withdrawal

continue to hang fire through one cause or another. As things stand at the most it is just possible that the T. U. C. may be compelled in the near future to run the risk of suspension of activities, an outcome that would be greatly welcome to the hearts of the employers and their tools.

Unfortunately it is not only in white trade union ranks that things are in a bad way. The position is not too bright in the camp of non-European trade unionism. The I. C. U. (Industrial and Commercial Union) leaders still claim to have a large membership in their organisation but ever since their base desertion of the class struggle outlook a year ago stagnation has set in in many quarters. No longer is it possible for I. C. U. leaders to boast of a continual influx of new members, rather is there every reason to believe that a big falling away has resulted in the different provinces.

This is not surprising in view of the fact that the present I. C. U. leadership, having once turned its back on the policy of class struggle, has seen fit during the past year to assume the role of strikebreakers. In various native strikes which occurred the I. C. U.'s officials washed their hands of the strikers because they dared to have recourse to strike action as a means of rectifying grievances. For instance there was the example of the **Durban Dock strike on June 16th** when some fifteen hundred native workers downed tools and went on strike because twenty of their mates were arrested for non-payment of the poll tax. The I. C. U. leaders disclaimed to support these strikers and they were ultimately bulldozed back to work by the authorities. It was the same story in the case of a couple of strikes of native workers on the **Natal coal mines**, the reason for I. C. U. lack of interest in these latter occasions being the excuse that the men in alliance with the colliery management had "engineered" the business.

In the most typical case of all, the **Railway strike at Kazerne, Johannesburg**, involving four hundred native workers the facts of the I. C. U. leaders betrayal were most clearly demonstrated. These native workers had struck work for higher wages and better rations many of them being I. C. U. members. The scene of the strike was little more than a stonethrow from the Union headquarters and with little delay an I. C. U. organiser was on the scene to have a talk with the employer. After an hour's confab in the employer's office this organiser advised the men to go back unconditionally to work as the whole strike was illegal. The strikers greeted him with a howl of fury and he quickly made himself scarce and left them to their own devices. The business being left in the lurch in this fashion it was not surprising to find that twenty four hours later a stream of recruited native labourers bound for the gold mines had been diverted by the Chamber of Mines recruiting organ, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association to work in the strikers' places, and every striker was paid off and sent back to his home. A few days later the I. C. U. official organ "**The Workers Herald**" came out with a leading article in which inter alia was stated. "The reasonable attitude of I. C. U. officials at the recent Kazerne strike should prove to the Government that they are not dealing with a lot of hotheads but that they are dealing with men who are anxious to assist both employer and employed. Had the Kazerne natives listened to the advice of I. C. U. officials... no doubt the whole case might have been amicably settled."

An instance of the above description shews clearly the depths to which the I. C. U. leaders have now sunk. Inside the I. C. U. itself opportunism is flourishing and already in the course of the year two small splits have occurred in branches in **Natal** and the **Orange Free State**. In both cases the split resulted in consequence of disgruntlement of certain reactionary elements who apparently were after more plums for themselves. It is now reported that there is much manoeuvring going on in the I. C. U. aiming at a reshuffling of official positions and that this is one of the reasons behind **Kadalie's** abrupt recall from his European and American tour before it has been completed.

The native workers, it is clear, are thus faced with a very serious and responsible task. They have to find ways and means of rescuing their industrial organisation from the hands of the opportunist elements that have got control, kick these gentlemen out of the way of doing further harm, and get down to the task of a sincere waging of the class struggle.

Earlier in the present year it was thought that the **African National Congress** was getting ready to take up the issue from the point at which the I. C. U. leaders had left off. Any such

hope, however, was soon shewn to be unjustified. One of the E. C. members, J. G. Gumede, returned from the Brussels Conference of the League Against Colonial Oppression with a radical programme of struggle embodying the organisation of native labour, and for a while he outlined this at native meetings. At the A. N. C. convention held in Bloemfontein in July last he was elected President of the Congress but its new Executive was once more found to be dominated by men who are in many respects closely allied to the Chamber of Mines. The issues and points raised by the Brussels Conference were quickly allowed to drift into oblivion. The A. N. C. proved itself incapable of giving a lead and soon found itself dragging along in pretty much the same old rut. It is very questionable now whether the A. N. C. will ever cut much of a figure for it has woefully let slip a fine opportunity to base itself on the broad basis of the masses, and of course there is practically no native bourgeoisie as such from which it could develop an anti-imperialist support.

Sunk in stagnation as the organisations of the workers are, yet the picture is not without its hints of brightness. The gap between the white workers and the bourgeoisie is broadening and economic issues are beginning to sweep to the front. The irksomeness of the Conciliation machinery has already led to a number of strike outbreaks during the past few months and discontent on the Rand gold mines is daily becoming more intensified. The sporadic strike outbursts amongst the native workers who groan under the most intolerable conditions are steadily educating the latter in the school of experience, a school that is bound sooner or later to throw up that native working class leadership which is still greatly lacking. Not yet have the native toilers produced genuine fighting class leaders who won't betray them; not yet has the feeling of class struggle permeated sufficiently the white producers to overcome their racial outlook. As time goes on however, the factors making for this end are gradually developing and with the growth of industrialisation in South Africa the labour movement will grow and expand also.
