

# THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

## Trade Unionism and the Organisation of the Native Masses in South Africa.

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Once again the question of linking up the forces of the working class movement in South Africa has been raised in trade union ranks, and once again it has been relegated to the dim and distant future. This question of workers' unity, the most serious problem which confronts the South African working class, has been raised time and again in the organised labour movement, but just as frequently has it been turned down by the privileged upper stratum, the white labour aristocracy. The latter indeed are so hostilely antagonistic to the native and coloured workers that they prefer to drag along in the slough of stagnation and decay rather than achieve solidarity and triumph through the aid of their fellow-exploited.

When the matter of taking common action with the non-European workers was raised this year at the Annual Conference of the South African Trade Union Congress, it was made clear that the white trade unionists still held to their old dogmatic standpoint with the same incredibly foolish persistence. The above mentioned Conference took place at Capetown on April 15 to 17th, and in most respects it turned out to be a comparatively ineffective gathering.

The proceedings were on lines similar to those of last year's Congress and dealt in the main with amendments to the Constitution and resolutions from affiliated organisations. There was a regular pot-pourri of amendments dealt with but very few were incorporated in the Constitution. Some wanted the T. U. C. to take up a "No politics" attitude; others wanted the word "employees" taken out of the Constitution and "workers" substituted in its place. The discussion on the latter point brought the leading delegate of the Engineering Union (A. E. U.) to his feet with the declaration that he for one (and it appeared

to be the opinion of a number of others) had no objection to including mine-managers in the trade unions. The "refined" and "sedate" term "employees" which many considered so conveniently all-embracing was allowed to stand.

Numerous resolutions were passed decrying unemployment, the Sedition Bill, indentured labour, etc., and demanding out-of-work pay and a forty-four hour week for industry. One resolution passed denounced imperialist intervention in China and pledged support to the struggling Chinese workers. White trade unionism in South Africa will readily pay lip service to the class struggle of non-European workers provided it takes place in other lands. No sooner do they turn their eyes and thoughts, however, than their whole attitude undergoes a complete change. This was demonstrated clearly by the manner in which they shelved the report of the **Brussels Conference** at this particular Congress. All the resolutions passed by the **League against Imperialism and for National Independence** which were submitted by the T. U. C. delegate who had attended Brussels were allowed to lie un-read on the table, and the written report giving a brief summary of the events that had transpired at the Congress, was passed over almost in silence.

Whilst the T. U. C. was sitting at **Capetown**, a telegram was received from the native workers' Union (**I. C. U.**), also in session at **Durban**, asking for a common front against the capitalist enemy. This appeal was turned down after some discussion in which some of the delegates declared that the white workers would be up in arms against any such proposal, whilst others against took refuge in the excuse that "lacking a mandate from their Unions" they could do nothing in this matter. Thus in this fashion was one more example given of how the South Africa European workers are determined to sacrifice working class unity and solidarity on the altar of racial prejudice.

The decision of the white trade unions on this point though not unexpected is bound to have serious consequences for the movement as a whole. In the first place it will condemn the Unions to prolong inactivity and render them powerless to put up a fight against the shackles of the Conciliation Act, and in the second it will make easy the fierce anti-working-class offensive being inaugurated by the **Hertzog Government**. The **S. A. T. U. C.** is in a poor position for putting up a defence against employers' attacks, for its last Conference shewed a representation of only 10,000 workers as compared with almost twice that number a year ago. In addition to this it has to encounter a rival in the shape of the **Cape Federation of Labour Unions**, a body of similar strength located in the **Cape Province**, which is ambitious of becoming the national centre of trade unionism in the country.

The antagonisms existing between the various trade union groups all contribute towards making the problem of attaining workers' unity a very serious and difficult one. The reactionary outlook of the white workers gives little hope for the future of anything tangible being secured from that direction to assist in building up a united-working class front. It is mainly to the efforts of the down-trodden non-Europeans, beset by grave obstacles though they are, that one must look for the sound growth of a solid proletarian basis.

At the present time native trade unionism is passing through an exceedingly difficult period as a consequence of its most prominent leaders going over to the viewpoint of the masterclass. Whether it will succeed in weathering its present crisis or not, seems none too clear at the moment. Although the rank and file of the movement are sound, they are still pretty backward, and this gives a free hand to the violently opportunist bureaucrats who are in control to engage in inflicting incalculable harm. Already their efforts have resulted in almost killing the movement in the **Cape Province** and they are seeking might and main to transform the **I. C. U.** into a "respectable constitutional body" deserving of the good wishes of the boss class.

At the Seventh Annual Congress of the **I. C. U. (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union)** held in **Durban** during the second week in April they curbed the enthusiasm of the few sincere rank and file delegates present and very effectively stifled rank and file opinion. This Congress was in the nature of a "packed" gathering, and was mainly composed of those whose chief concern is to hang on to paid official positions. The bureaucratic leaders dominated the proceedings throughout and

after skilfully playing on the radical sentiments of their followers pushed through a resolution debarring any member of the I. C. U. from associating himself with the **Communist Party**. There are quite a number of native workers in the C. P., and according to this decision they will henceforth be forbidden trade union membership.

Never was a Congress more contradictory than this one. It passed resolutions of protest against the Sedition Bill, Government Native Bills, Colour Bar, etc., but when it came to ways and means of organising opposition to these measures, its erstwhile "revolutionary" leader, **Kadalie**, could only move that a "day of prayer" be held as a protest. Fear of the rank and file made the Congress turn this motion down and decide in favour of demonstrations of protest.

One resolution passed decided that the I. C. U. should celebrate **May Day** in order to "demonstrate the international solidarity of labour and symbol of class struggle", but this profession of solidarity sounds rather hollow coming as it does from men who are persecuting militant communist workers. The precise motive which lead the I. C. U. leaders to send greetings and appeal for common action to the **white** trade unionists is not very clear, for whilst the native rank and file would undoubtedly welcome a rapprochement, their opportunist leaders wish to avoid it. The deceit and cunning of the latter is difficult to fathom.

For their organisation they claim a total membership of 100,000, but this figure, one is inclined to think, is a bit exaggerated. The precise details of the organisational strength, finance, etc., are very carefully kept secret, even the delegates to the Annual Conference having the financial report withheld from them.

The foregoing facts in connection with South Africa Trade Unionism illustrate the grave difficulties and obstacles which beset it. Where it is not weak numerically, it is generally the prey of unscrupulous reactionaries who are very little concerned with its vital interests.

The building up of organisational unity between black and white is a very difficult task, and its achievement would appear to be still a matter of years of patient, persevering work.

More immediate and beneficial results can be obtained by the unification of the masses of non-European toilers, and indeed a big impetus has now been given to this line of development by the return of the **Brussels** native delegates.

One of these delegates is **J. T. Gumede**, a prominent native leader of the **African National Congress**. Formerly a strong racist, he has come back from his trip to Europe with a new understanding and a new outlook. He now perceives that the only hope of salvation for the millions of toiling blacks lies in a militant policy of struggle against capitalism conducted by a united front of workers and oppressed peoples. Since his return from Europe he has outlined this policy to mass meetings of natives at all the most important centres in the country, and everywhere it is finding increasing support.

At the **African National Congress** Convention to be held in **Bloemfontein** on June, 28th, **Gumede** will raise the question of adopting new tactics to promote unity of the non-European masses. For some years past the two important native organisations, the I. C. U. and the **A. N. C.**, have kept aloof from each other. **Gumede** will now urge that the **A. N. C.** will take the lead in promoting an all-in native movement, having the I. C. U. affiliated to it as its industrial backbone, in order to fight for the immediate political and economic demands of the oppressed Africans.

This policy is bound to meet with the support of the non-European masses who desire nothing more than an immediate closing of ranke in order to effectively combat their exploiters. If the **A. N. C.** shapes its policy on these lines, it will be the means of developing a mighty forward movement against the **Africander imperialists**, and will put to the critical test the opportunist leaders of the I. C. U. South African capitalism is mortally afraid of the awakening to active life of the toiling masses of non-Europeans, and once a solid front of oppressed Africans pursuing a militant policy can be attained, then most assuredly will it have good cause to tremble.