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1973-05
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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in [illegible]
4.00pm MAY 1973

Title: Black Strikes, Prices and Trade Union Organisation 1939-1973

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No. 008

BLACK STRIKES, PRICES AND TRADE UNION ORGANISATION 1939-73.

David Henderson. 21. May 73.

INTRODUCTION:

In this paper we will examine the situation in which strikes by Black workers take place and their relationship to trade union organisation. Hopefully we will be able to tease out the strands of relationship between the essential components: between prices, strikes and labour organisation. We should attempt to answer the following questions: are strikes basically the result of increases in the prices of essential commodities (particularly food); can strikes by African workers be seen as defensive action to re-establish real wages; how far does relative deprivation of Black workers result in trade union organisation and what are the optimum conditions for the formation and growth of African trade unions.

While the South African political system can be seen as basically labour repressive, Black workers have on numerous occasions attempted to organise themselves into trade unions. While State action against Black trade unions has undoubtedly stunted the labour movement severely, it is also true that the desire for organisation springs again and again from the ranks of Black workers. It is precisely the determinants of this desire and the economic background which leads Black workers to take deliberate action to further their interests which is the central concern of this paper. This desire on the part of Black workers is obviously stronger at some times than at others, and while not wanting to introduce a crude materialistic analysis, the advanced consciousness of certain workers can only lead to mass action in certain types of situations. It is these situations which we will now examine.

Before describing the relationship between price increases,

2/strike action

of living. The most important difference between a Black budget and a White budget in South Africa is that the proportion of family income spent on food is 40 per cent in the former and 27,5 in the latter. Food prices have been the fastest rising component of the official cost of living index because of a selective State pricing system, a marketing system designed in the interests of White farmers, and now international food shortages.

Because of the particular relevance of food in the Black family budget we can take the food index within the consumer price index as an indication of the most basic cost to the family in the absence of any other suitable indicator of the change in costs over a relatively long period. The price changes over five year periods have been taken to indicate changes in the long run and to pinpoint important periods in food price changes.

Percentage increases in the food index over five year periods

1930-34	1935-39	1940-44	1945-49	1950-54
- 5,9	4,9	34,0	14,7	33,5

1955-59	1960-64	1965-69	1970
9,8	7,4	10,6	30,6 (March 1973)

A very cursory examination of the figures show a decline in food prices during the depression, relatively low price increases until the Second World War and massive price increases during the war, which even in South Africa forced limitations on food supply. Following the war, prices increased persistently, but not near the level of increase during the war. The upward spurt of increases in 1950-54 was again due to international war: the Korean War which caused international food prices to rise to Second World War levels. Thereafter (1955-69) prices continued to rise at pre-war levels, although relatively quietly, until in the last three year period prices

an accentuation of agricultural inefficiency and established State policy toward White farmers.

The changes in the food index can be taken as an indication of the pressure for the reduction of real wages of Black workers, even if cost of living allowances were introduced on the basis of the consumer price index, which has been shown to be inadequate in regard to Black families.

(b) Strike action

We can take strike action (not unreasonably) to represent the collective attempt by Black workers to resist reductions in real wages, to raise real wages and to resist management prerogatives particularly in hiring and firing. These attributes of strikes on the part of Black workers have been mainly limited to defence since these are the actual characteristics of the struggle, not only in South Africa, but in other countries (Hyman, 38, 77). A fundamental difference between South Africa and other countries is the racial stratification at the workpla and the fact that the interests of White and Black workers have been forced to diverge to a point where class relations have become race relations. In 1971 and 1972 the position was quite clear: strikes are either White strikes or Black strikes and on no occasion during those two years did White workers combine with Black workers. On one occasion, in 1971, however, Coloure and White workers did combine, and during the Natal strikes Indian and African workers, in most cases willingly, struck together, even though there was clear stratification among the strikers. In one case the stratification (as shown by tight groupings outside the factory gate) went as follows: Indian men African men, Indian and African women; all of whom were on strike at the same time. The overall stratification is, howeve quite definite: strikes are predominantly Black and African

25, and in 1972 there were 18 out of 22. (See annexure "A")

Historically, strike action by White and Black workers has had different characteristics. White strikes have been more prolonged, have totalled a larger number of striker-days and have peaked at different times. During the year of the famous miners' strike of 1922, there were 29 001 White workers on strike and 4 Black workers, with a total of 1 339 508 striker-days. This situation can be compared with 1946 when there were 84 035 Black workers and 11 539 White workers on strike for a total of 209 350 striker-days. Again in the following year there were 22 264 White and 6 584 Black workers on strike for a total of 1 378 063 striker-days. These years have been the peak years of strike action in South Africa and illustrate the power position among workers. White workers have the advantage of trade union organisation, strike funds and important political support and can engage in what Hyman terms "trials of strength." Black workers lack recognised trade unions, lack strike funds, face political attacks and the police, and are thus limited to "demonstration strikes." Even if the most exaggerated figures of the number of African workers on strike in Natal and elsewhere this year are accepted (say double the highest number of strikers in South African industrial history: i.e. 200 000) there would be only 400 000 striker-days if we accept, realistically, that most strikes lasted two days.

Because of the persistent number of White strikes, a better indicator than the number of strikes recorded each year as an indicator of labour activity among Black workers is the total number of Black workers on strike each year. This figure includes African, Coloured and Indian workers, but can be taken largely to represent African workers who constitute the mass of strikers in any year. As in the case of

Average number of Black strikers over five year periods

1930-34	1935-39	1940-44	1945-49	1950-54
1 986	3 265	7 540	22 586	4 454
1955-59	1960-64	1965-69	1970	
7 849	3 911	3 120	22 300*	

*Assuming 4 000 strikers in 1972 and 100 000 in 1973 (both conservative estimates).

The figures indicate the low incidence of Black strikers during the depression at a time when Black and White unemployment was at its height. From 1931 to 1934, uncharacteristically there were fewer Black strikers each year than White strikers. In the next five year period the average number of strikers doubled. During the war years, 1939-45, a record number of 304 strikes involving 58 000 Black workers and 6 000 Whites were recorded as compared with 197 strikes in the fifteen years from 1924 to 1938. (Clack, 1962, Appendix C). In the immediate post-war period the number of Black strikers trebled, due mainly to the massive African mine workers' strike of 1946, in which year 84 035 Black workers were on strike. From this peak the number of strikers each year declined, although the average figure for 1950-54 was still higher than the pre-war levels. The rise to an average figure of 7 849 for the period 1955-59 included such famous strikes as the Amato textile strike of February 1958, which involved 3 700 workers. From this post-war peak the number of Black workers on strike would have justified the conclusion that Black workers were increasing economically satisfied by reaping the benefits of the economic boom. There was a consistent decline in the number of strikers over three five-year periods from which one could have concluded that Black workers were fundamentally a docile labour

7/force harried ...

line. The warning of what was imminent came with the stevedoring and watch patrol services strikes in 1972 which involved 1 359 and 197 African workers respectively. Both took place in Durban towards the end of the year. From the beginning of 1973 the strikes spread from Durban throughout Natal to the Transvaal and at least 100 000 workers have already been on strike.

The latest strikes by Black workers have forced a fundamental reappraisal of the position of Black workers in industry, mining, commerce and Government services. The immediate results have included widespread wage increases, the revision of wages of unskilled workers laid down in wage determinations, and a definite change in Government policy concerning the training of Black workers in urban areas.

(c) Trade union organisation:

Statistics on the number of African trade unions and their members have never been kept by the State. Because of this deficiency we have to rely on numerous sources who possibly may have quoted statistics favourable to their own organisations. While this is a hazard, an attempt can be made to draw out the main periods of trade union organisation which characterisation would probably be agreed upon by trade unionists and others who have studied trade union organisation. From an examination of the data in Annexure "B" it appears that the war years were a time for consolidation and expansion of the labour movement. From 1940-45 members of African trade unions grew from 23 000 to 58 000 and the number of unions from 21 to 119. From 1945-50 there was certainly some evidence of decline in the number of unions, from 119 to 52, although it would be more difficult to say that there was a definite decline in

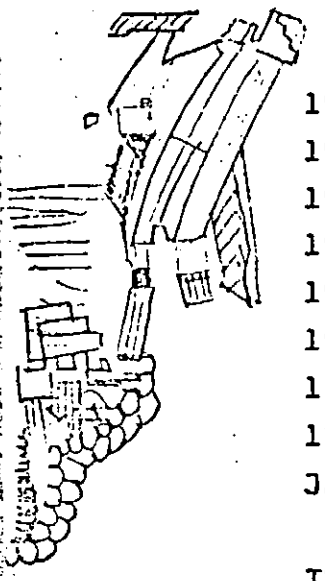
6/membership because .....

was a decline in trade union organisation due to strong opposition from the Nationalist Government, but a resurgence from 1955-59 (the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was formed in March 1955). SACTU declined rapidly in the early 1960s due in no small part to State repression, in particular a high proportion of leaders being banned. During the two five year periods 1960-64 and 1965-69 there was definitely regression both in the number of unions and in terms of membership. The 1960s are widely regarded as a decade of decay in trade union organisation and morale. From 1970, however, a number of nuclei organisations aiming at establishing trade unions have been started: the Urban Training Group, Black Workers' Union, the Black Workers' Project, and a group in Durban. From 1968 to 1973 there was severe dislocation followed by recovery and a growth in membership and in the number of unions from 8 088 members and 7 unions to 19 800 members and 8 unions. Since the wave of strikes in Natal, two new unions have been formed: the Metal Workers' Union and the Seamen and Dockers' Union.

PRIMARY RELATIONSHIPS IN LABOUR ACTIVITY:

In view of the prevailing opinion that price increases are largely the cause of strike action taken by Black workers it is worth examining the relationship between food prices and the average number of strikers over a fairly long period. From these figures it may be possible to see some correlation between the three variables: prices, strikes and trade union organisation even in a situation of labour repression. The percentage change in food prices have already been shown, while the average number of Black strikers has been reduced to an index of which the base figure is for the period 1935-39. During these five years there was regular but not extraordinary

9/numbers of .....



	Strike index 1935-39 = 100:	Percentage change in food prices:	Membership of African trade unions:
1930-35	61	- 5,9	-
1935-39	100	4,9	-
1940-44	231	34,0	19 700 (1941)
1945-49	692	14,7	58 000 (1945)
1950-54	136	33,5	38 251 (Mar. 19
1955-59	240	9,8	-
1960-64	120	7,4	52 800 (1961)
1965-69	96	10,6	8 088 (1968)
Jan. 1970-1973	683	30,6(Mar.)	19 800 (1973)

The figures demonstrate a definite, but not necessarily direct, relationship between food prices and strike action. Strikes tend to trail behind food prices rather than accompany them. In the period 1940-44 there were larger numbers of workers out on strike at a time when food prices were increasing rapidly but the real force of strike action came in the next five year period. Again the rapidly rising food prices of the period 1950-54 resulted in mass action only in the following period 1955-59. Correspondingly, the lower increases in food prices in 1955-59 and 1960-64 resulted in a lower number of workers on strike only in the next five year period. Finally, however, we have to consider the years following 1970 when Black workers have taken action out of proportion to the price increases in the previous five year period.

The trends which become apparent from studying the figures can be explained in the following way. Black workers are acutely aware of rising food prices, but this does not lead them to take immediate action while real wages are declining. Rather, what happens is that pressure for strike action builds up in a labour force as a collective consciousness of deprivation takes shape. Discontent takes time to mature, and Black workers, like other workers throughout the world are reluctant to take direct action if other alternatives are offered. It is

10/only when .....

strike action is taken while the prices are still rising. In the previous fifteen years before 1970, food prices had been rising moderately, and the steep price increases of the years following 1970 can be seen as a large factor (although not the sole factor) behind the widespread strikes. In this case, as also during the war years, the food prices were so drastic that "preliminary" action was taken to secure immediate relief.

The relationship between the two previous variables: food prices and strike action; and the number of members of African trade unions is more difficult to establish. Generally speaking, African strikes are, and have been, unorganised. Organised strike action would bring the elimination of the trade union by employers or the State: members of the trade union could be dismissed and the secretary banned. Strikes by African workers are invariably "wildcat" strikes, and the best the union can hope for is to be called in to negotiate on behalf of the strikers and get them back to work. The casual relationship in terms of the two previous variables would be as follows: price increases eventually result in strike action if sufficient adjustment is not made to wages. Strike action heightens the consciousness of the workers involved and these workers are then ready for organisation and the articulation of their demands through their own institution.

THE PRESENT SITUATION OF AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS:

Following the destruction of mass movements among African workers, in particular SACTU which combined political and industrial demands, the growth in membership of surviving African trade unions and the establishment of new unions has been problematical. The best (and at present the sole) example

In June 1972, African bus drivers employed by the Public Utility Transport Corporation (PUTCO) went on strike to back their wage demands and rejected an offer of a 2 per cent increase from the employers. Three hundred of the drivers were arrested in Johannesburg, some after they had gone to John Vorster Square to demand to join their colleagues in jail. The PUTCO drivers formed a Drivers' Committee to collect money for the defence of the arrested men. The drivers were not prosecuted, however, the employers were eventually forced to pay the fines for the men and the drivers received a 33½ per cent wage increase. In February 1973, African bus drivers employed by the Johannesburg City Council threatened to strike in support of their wage claims and eventually a satisfactory interim increase was agreed upon. Subsequently, the PUTCO Drivers' Committee was converted, after advice had been sought from the Urban Training Project, into a new union for African transport workers - the Transport Workers and Allied Union. The executive committee consists of workers employed by PUTCO and the Johannesburg City Council.

Following the successful strikes in January and February 1973, there is considerable ferment among African workers in Natal. Altogether between 1 January 1973 and 31 March 1973 there were 160 strikes involving 61 410 workers. (Hansard 11, Paragraph 689, 24 April 1973). Although the Kwa-Zulu Government was not involved in the early stages, the strike at the Alusaf Aluminimum Smelting Plant at Richard's Bay, brought about a confrontation between the Kwa-Zulu Government and the management of the plant. Subsequently the Kwa-Zulu Government, and in particular Mr. Barney Dladla, Minister for Community Development, has been outspoken on the necessity for African workers to organise themseoves in trade unions. Mr. Dladla addressed the inaugural meeting of the Metal Workers' Union at

13/Pietermaritzburg.....

of Clothing Workers (NUCW) which works closely with the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa on the Rand. The NUCW originated after the passage of the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act in 1953 which specifically excluded African women from the definition of an "employee". With the close co-operation of the Garment Workers' Union of South Africa, the NUCW, which has 300 elected shop stewards, now enjoys considerable recognition from employers at the industrial and plant level. During a recent series of work stoppages in the clothing industry in the Transvaal the NUCW organisers negotiated on behalf of the workers for considerable cost of living wage increases despite the hostility of the Department of Labour.

Apart from the NUCW, other African trade unions, with the exception of the Black Workers' Union, are grouped with the Urban Training Project. This organisation was founded by trade union organisers who had been associated in the attempts of the African Affairs Section of the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) to organise African workers. This section of TUCSA was closed down in 1968 after attacks by the Minister of Labour on the organisation, although TUCSA officials at the time also argued that African workers had been unresponsive to organisation. Associated with the Urban Training Project are a number of African unions which are in the process of establishment or revival, some of them among the oldest African industrial unions on the Rand. The Laundry and Dry Cleaning Industries Union was formed in 1927. (See Annexure "B" for the full list and membership). Despite tensions within the organisation (which led to the dismissal of an organiser, Mr. Drake Koka, who subsequently established the Black Workers' Union), there has been some success in providing an organisational centre for African trade unions, education for trade union personnel, and help with workers' committees.

publicity workers are eager to form trade unions. Following the establishment of the Metal Workers" Union, the seamen have also had an inaugural meeting to elect an interim executive committee to write a constitution. Garment and textile workers are also wanting to form industrial unions.

In Natal the organisation of African workers has the direct support of the Garment Workers' Industrial Union (Natal) and an administrative service has been formed to help incipient African trade unions to get off the ground.

If, as seems probable, strikes among African workers have not come to an end, then from the trend of strike action lagging behind price increases, national labour unrest can be expected in the next five year period. In this situation it now seems possible that mass action on the part of Black workers will revive the labour movement, and that large-scale industrial unions for African workers with growing bargaining power will become a reality.

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Year	Area	Trade Union Group	Members	Number of Unions
1929	Johannesburg	Non-European Trade Union Federation	10 000	More than
1940	Johannesburg	Joint Committee of African Trade Unions	23-26 000	21
1941	Johannesburg	Joint Committee of African Trade Unions	15 700	7
	Johannesburg	Co-ordinating Committee of African Trade Unions	4 000	-
		TOTAL	19 700	-
1945	National	Non-European Trade Union Council	58 000	119
1950	National	All African trade unions	38 251	52
1961	National	South African Congress of Trade Unions	38 791	46
		FOFATUSA	14 000	-
		TOTAL	52 791	-
1968	Johannesburg	TUCSA affiliates	8 088	7
1973	Transvaal	National Union of Clothing Workers	17 000	
		Engineering & Allied Workers' Union	500	
		Transport & Allied Workers' Union	400	
		African Chemical Workers' Union	300	
		Laundry & Dry Cleaning Industries' Union	500	
		Black Workers' Union	600	
	Natal	Metal Workers' Union	300	
		Seamen's Union	200	
		TOTAL	19 800	

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For statistics on labour relations see the Annual Reports of the Department of Labour.

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The Minister of Lab... (reply laid upon Table with leave of House):

(a) (i) Strikes as defined in the relative legislation totalle 25 in 1971 and 22 in 1972.

(ii) It is not clear what the hon. member has in mind with the expression "official strikes". If he is referring to what can be described as legal strikes, then the answer is nil in 1971 and one involving 21 Whites in 1972. The latter strike is included in the figure of 22 in (a)(i) above.

(b) 1971

Industry	Whites	Coloureds	Asiatics	Cent
Transport Undertaking (Goods) (2 strikes)	-	41	-	63
Canning Industry	-	-	-	562
Coal Trade	-	-	-	70
The Trade of Letting Flats or Rooms	-	-	-	8
Gold Mining Industry	72	-	-	-
Diamond Mining Industry	-	-	-	108
Copper Mining Industry	-	-	-	417
Clothing Industry	-	1	15	-
Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Industry (4 strikes)	-	13	-	392
Rope and Matting Industry	-	-	-	21
Plywood Industry	-	-	-	29
Milling Industry (2 strikes)..	-	-	-	288
Commercial Distributive Trade (2 strikes)	-	-	-	56
Cement Products Industry	-	-	-	60
Local Authorities	-	-	-	130
Meat Trade	-	-	-	209
Clothing Industry, Ladies Hosiery Division(2 strikes)..	-	13	-	43
Motor Industry	2	7	-	-
1972				
Gold Mining Industry	237	-	-	-
Chrome Mining Industry	15	-	-	-
Asbestos Mining Industry (3 strikes)	102	-	-	-
Building Industry	-	-	-	92
Iron, Steel, Engineering and Metallurgical Industry..	-	-	-	42
Civil Engineering Industry ...	-	8	-	-
Road Passenger Transport Industry (4 strikes)	-	-	-	739
Milling Industry	-	-	-	250
Liquor and Catering Trade	-	-	-	4
Rubber Manufacturing Industry	-	-	-	64
Clothing Industry (2 strikes)	-	-	-	426
Toxtile Industry	-	-	-	43
Stevedoring Trade	-	-	-	1 359
Diamond Mining Industry	-	-	-	136
Woodworking Industry	-	-	-	22
Watch Patrol Services	-	-	-	197

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