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**1974-02**
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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 RW
4.00pm FEBRUARY 1974

Title: Trade Unionism in South Africa: An Interview Report

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No. 009

# TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH AFRICA:
# AN INTERVIEW REPORT

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FIRST AND ONLY DRAFT
Please do not quote

Introductory Note: "Trade Unionism in South Africa" is a "working paper" of the most preliminary sort. I add that caveat not as a protection against criticism or quotation, but as genuine indication on the state of this research. This paper is based on interviewing still in progress (20 of 30 interviews are completed). The incompleteness is compounded by the mails and distance. Only six of the interview transcripts were available to me at the time of writing. The remainder were reconstructed from scattered notes and memory. Hence, my assessment of the labour movement is based on the roughest sorts of impressions and only limited access to my own data.

I have imposed an artificial constraint on this paper which is not a consequence of the mails or incompleteness. I have decided to exclude nearly all historical analysis, choosing instead to concentrate on the interview material. A large percentage of my time in the last year has indeed been devoted to the examination of Trades and Labour Council records, reports and correspondence of TUCSA, various Commissions of Inquiry (particularly into industrial legislation), the role of labour in the Pact Government and subsequent governments, including the post-1948 Nationalist Government. While these materials will prove central to my later work and any future publication, they will little inform this discussion. I am afraid this report is a self-interested attempt on my part to make sense of some fairly diffuse, but exciting interviews.

Labour unions, no less than any group in South Africa, use, perhaps exploit, the racial order; like other groups, their actions sometimes undermine the traditional patterns of differentiation and domination. But what proves inevitable in their mode of operation is that they relate to the race question. Groups must define their interests in terms of a given social context, they must rationalize their interests and seek to serve them. It is difficult to imagine a vital group failing to make such an assessment. It is even harder to imagine the persistence of a union (or a particular leadership) that totally disregarded the obstacles and possibilities in the racial context.

But because a group grapples with a set of social relationships - in South Africa, weighs the consequences of racial domination - we should not conclude that its primary interests are necessarily congruent with prevailing racial practice. We are not so cynical to believe that any consideration of trade union goals and policies that takes into account real differences in the work force is, therefore, part and parcel of the institutions of racial domination. A union may assess the race situation and move in a number of directions: it may indeed exploit the existing relationships and in effect countenance the racial order; it may sense an incompatibility between trade union interests and the system of racial privilege and seek perhaps, to undermine the traditional patterns; finally it may view the existing racial order as given and essentially unalterable and seek to formulate its goals and direction within this set context.

It is from these deliberations - often agonizing, perhaps sordid, and sometimes insensitive - that the trade union impact on race relations emerges. By examining

this process, we will begin to answer some basic questions about South African trade unions: To what extent do trade unions use or exploit the traditional racial order? Do their actions tend to undermine or sustain it? What sorts of social change might we reasonably expect to emerge from trade union activity?

## I. THE INTERVIEWS

Central to this report are 20 interviews with trade union secretaries. Each interview lasted somewhere between one hour (in one case) and four hours(in one case) and covered a great variety of topics (but nearly all related to the concerns of this paper). While the subject matter of the interviews was structured by a set format, the questions themselves were flexible and responsive to the particular interview context. (The "interview guidelines" appear in the Appendix). The average length of an interview was one hour and 45 minutes.

The trade unions were not selected on a random basis; thus any attempt at statistical inference should be avoided. The sample population includes the largest (white and mixed) trade unions in the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA), the South African Confederation of Labour and among the unaffiliated unions; several smaller but strategically placed unions were included in each case. White collar unions (e.g. the S.A. Society of Bank Officials) were excluded from the sample.

The 20 interviews already administered, evident in Table One, encompass nearly every significant union in the construction, manufacturing, railroads, mining and commercial fields; the interviews that remain to be done - the S.A. Yster-, Staal-, en Verwante Nywerhedeunie and the Garment Workers Union of the Western Province, among them - will be completed by March, 1974.

(TABLE ONE)

## II. TRADE UNIONS AND THE RACIAL ORDER

The role South African trade unions play in the racial order is worked out not solely in the management and organisation of the plant, site or mine. It finds expression in the philosophies that guide unions in their day to day operations - conceptions of conflict in capitalist society, notions of protection and security and attitudes toward industrial and craft organization. The trade union role is naturally apparent in labour-management bargaining and the day to day efforts of the union to reflect and serve membership (and perhaps working class) needs. Finally, the unions play to a more expansive set of relationships where they seek the intervention of political institutions. Government may, as a result, devise or alter the legislation that governs labour-management conflict; it may provide social benefits that improve the environment in which all workers live.

The examination of the trade union movement and its role in racial domination must be carried out at three levels - orientation, administration and politics. The remainder of this paper will be organized around these themes.

## TABLE ONE

*Completed Interviews*
1 October 1973

(+ interview transcripts available)

| TUCSA | UNAFFILIATED | CONFEDERATION |
|---|---|---|
| Johannesburg Municipal Transport Workers Union (1,208) | + S.A. Diamond Workers Union (773) | Artisan Staff Association (20,192) |
| Transvaal Leather and Allied Trades Industrial Union (2,621) | + Amalgamated Engineering Union (25,168) | Mine Workers Union (17,624) |
| S.A. Boilermakers Iron and Steel Workers and Welders Society (15,712) | + Amalgamated Society of Woodcutters (4,866) | Blanke Bouwerkersvakbond (2,396) (no longer affiliated) |
| S.A. Typographical Union (19,851) | + S.A. Postal Association (2,232) | + S.A. Footplate Staff Association (9,216 |
| National Union of Distributive Workers (14,364) | Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers of S.A. (9,963) | + S.A. Technical Officials (no longer affiliated) (Formerly S.A. Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association (4,236) and S.A. Reduction Workers Association (2,048) |
| S.A. Iron Moulders Society (2,079) | Motor Industry Employees Union (19,096) | |
| Garment Workers Union of S.A. (12,825) | Underground Officials Association (7,902) | |
| | S.A. Electrical Workers Union (16,000) | |
| Membership Coverage 68,660 | 86,000 | 55,812 |
| Potential Membership 162,918 | 169,078 | 183,781 |

Comments: The larger unions in the Cape and Natal have not yet been interviewed.

Coverage will increase substantially when interviews completed with Yster-, Staal-, Verwante Nywerhedeunie, die Spoorbond, and the National Association of Furniture and Allied Workers.

The summary of responses, presented in Table Two, indicates that these views, far from being isolated, express the general sentiment of trade union secretaries. This conciliatory attitude toward management is most pronounced among the unaffiliated and TUCSA unions.

TABLE TWO

Attitudes Toward Management

| TUCSA | | Unaffiliated | | Confederation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Conflict | Consensus | Conflict | Consensus | Conflict | Consensus |
| 2 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 3 |

It is ironic that the strongest commitments to labour-management conflict was expressed not by the "left-wing" unions (TUCSA), but by those most supportive of the government's race policies. These were also the unions who had most frequently resorted to "wildcat" walkouts as a bargaining tool. Of course, the reason for this conflictual relationship has little to do with "workers' solidarity" or incorporation, but derives from the perception that management is inexorably undermining the traditional colour bar. Conflict in this case does not represent a pressure toward incorporation; instead, it acts to confirm the exclusion existing in the labour market.

Only three unions recruit their members, to the extent that existing legislation permits, along industrial lines. Almost half of the unions can be typed pure artisan unions; a number of the other unions encompass, in addition to artisans, semi-skilled workers (whose work usually constitutes some fragment of artisan work). In nearly every case, these latter unions are dominated by their artisan memberships.

TABLE THREE

Trade Union Organization

| TUCSA | | | Unaffiliated | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Artisan | Artisan and Semi-skilled | Industrial | Artisan | Artisan and Semi-skilled | Industria |
| 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 0 |

| Confederation | | |
|---|---|---|
| Artisan | Artisan and Semi-skilled | Industrial |
| 3 | 2 | 0 |

There are preliminary indications in Table Four that South African trade unions do indeed exert themselves on behalf of new members. This is particularly marked among the TUCSA unions and to a lesser extent, those in the Confederation. But this commitment to recruitment is not so much an effort to organize the unorganised as it is an attempt to protect the existing membership from "poaching" or to add new members at the expense of other unions. Only three unions' organizing efforts (all of those in TUCSA) are consistent with the notion of incorporation.

TABLE FOUR

Recruitment of New Members

| TUCSA | | Unaffiliated | | Confederation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Active | Inactive | Active | Inactive | Active | Inactive |
| 5 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 2 |

Few of the unions indicated recent increases in their membership rolls and many secretaries, in fact, confessed to a decline. Of those unions with expanding membership rolls none of the secretaries indicated that active recruiting had anything to do with the increase. An unaffiliated union, for example, credited its membership expansion to a new check-off or stop order system.

> In other words, the men have their subscriptions to the union deducted from their wages. ... Where a union had more than 50 percent of the employees in a factory, the employer was obliged to put into operation this stop order system.

Others simply pointed to the obvious expansion in the industries where their members were employed. A number of the other secretaries showed no concern whatever for the size of their unions, so long as their active members remain employed. One secretary, to avoid an influx of African workers, actively participated in a mechanization and bonus system that reduced the demand for his own members.

The limited commitment of these trade unions to incorporation is summarized in the willingness of perhaps half the unions to accept existing exclusions as permanent, even if the legislative framework was permissive of an alternative vision. (This will be elaborated later.) A large proportion of the TUCSA unions indicated that their understanding of a genuine trade union movement included the notion of "one big union" - a single union for all the workers in an industry, or at least unions that encompassed all those capable of entering specific crafts. These sentiments were shared by a number of the unaffiliated unions but by no means a majority. Half of the unions - including most of the unaffiliated unions and all of the Confederation unions - had incorporated the existing limitations into their vision of "proper" trade union activity. What had begun as unfortunate constraints imposed by a government unsympathetic to traditional labour interests had become in the minds of these trade unionists, not simply an unavoidable restriction on their work, but a basic part of their vision for the trade union movement.

TABLE FIVE

Vision for the Trade
Union Movement

| TUCSA | | Unaffiliated | | Confederation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Single Union | Separate or Exclusive | Single Union | Separate or Exclusive | Single Union | Separate Exclusive |
| 6 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 5 |

A secretary in a Confederation union hinted at this vision when discussing the fragmentation of jobs formerly reserved for his members. He said,

> It will not affect the lifeblood of the association. The Coloured and Indians have their own unions on the railroad. The Bantu have a system of representation. ... These fellows will not have the same responsibility as the white chap and the rate for the job does not apply.
>
> No, it doesn't concern me because we do not represent these fellows.

The picture that emerges from these interviews is one of unions that represent largely artisans, that feel little need to protect their members through the organization of unorganized workers, even if a change in the political climate were to allow it, and who fail to perceive a fundamental conflict between their interests and those of capital. It is not the picture of a movement that finds the exclusive aspects of the racial order crashing against its own drive to incorporate the disparate elements in the working class. For the most part, these unions are undistrubed by the stagnation of their membership rolls (as long as they are not poached by other unions); they spend few of their union resources among the great mass of unorganized workers; few, if any, feel driven to a more militant course by antipathetic feelings toward management. Though there are indications that a number, perhaps a majority, of TUCSA unions would embrace in a different context a more expansive view of the labour movement, their sentiments are not shared widely among the other labour groupings. Indeed, the openness of TUCSA unions themselves seem impressive only in comparison with the exclusive practices prevalent in the movement as a whole. TUCSA unions, like most other trade unions in South Africa, devote few resources to organizing the unrepresented worker; their attitude toward management is wholly conciliatory.

Table Six

Wage Structure

A. Do you believe the wage gap is too large?

| TUCSA | | Unaffiliated | | Confederation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| 7 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 |

B. Would you accept smaller salary increases in the future to reduce the gap?

| TUSCA | | Unaffiliated | | Confederation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| 2 | 5 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 5 |

Ambivalence about the wage gap turns to a near universal horror of minimizing union salary advances to allow larger wage increases at the lower grades of work. A secretary of a mining union was vociferous:

> Yes, the wage gap is too large, but we will not sacrifice our wages. We have to keep up with increases in the cost of living. It's not our concern. They should have looked after them when they came into the business. No, that would not be acceptable to my association.

Other trade union secretaries were willing to see substantial increases at the lower grades, so long as these advances were not used to blunt the just demands of the white unions:

> No, we wouldn't support that. Non-whites should get higher percentage increases but should not take it away from the whites. If we have a fair claim - based on the facts - it would be unfair to deny which is fairly and squarely due to you.

Most trade unionists failed to see any contradiction in their decrying the wage gap but denouncing any action that tended to curtail their wage and benefit increases; a number (perhaps two) accepted the contradiction but felt management or the government could make up the difference.

Although Africans are excluded from the registered trade unions, many find their wages determined by the actions of these unions in an event (in conjunction with management and Labour Department representatives). Under the Industrial Conciliation Act, for example, the terms of wage agreements are extended to workers not party to the industrial council (which always encompasses the African work force). All of the TUCSA unions were cognisant of this role; they regularly made negotiating proposals with regard to African wages. A larger proportion of the unaffiliated union secretaries admitted that these arrangements were left to management, the government representatives or some combination of the two. In only two cases (both TUCSA unions) did any of the unions consult with African workers prior to negotiations.

C. Politics

In most Western societies, trade union influence on national politics has come to overshadow its role in organizing the work place. Indeed, in a number of nations, the labour movement has become the government. It is natural that we ask, then, what demands the South African trade unions have made on the political institutions. Have they used their influence (to the extent they have influence) to foster incorporation?

The Industrial Conciliation Act (Amended 1956) is the principal legislation governing union activities in South Africa - and the legislation that guarantees exclusive trade unionism. There is no other subject, however, on which these secretaries showed greater unanimity. The IC Act was viewed as a sound piece of industrial legislation - in fact, "the best industrial legislation in the world" - legislation that has provided unions recognition, self-government by unions and management in specific industries, and a framework for industrial peace. In fairness, a number of secretaries deplored the exclusion of Africans from the Act's coverage. (Africans are denied the status of "employee".) This provision is viewed as an unfortunate restraint that, nonetheless, fails to detract from the rights and safeguards provided in the Act. The IC Act is not considered, even by those who actively support African trade unionism, as an instrument though which white privileges have been entrenched at the expense of Africans.

Nonetheless most of the unions would like to see the IC Act amended in some manner to allow "better communication" between the mass of Africans and the employers. TUCSA unions are unanimous in wanting this to take place within the existing unions - either as fully integrated bodies or as separate locals under a single executive. Opinion among the unaffiliate unions is considerably more varied, with only two secretaries supporting full incorporation. (These commitments were also highly ambiguous.) Two other secretaries supported full trade union rights for Africans but outside the existing trade unions, as completely autonomous entities. The remainder of the secretaries wanted no change in the existing legislation or something only slightly more substantial than works committees (but not "Western-type" trade unions). For the most part, Confederation secretaries were unwilling to support full trade union rights for Africans. They learned to some ambiguous construct - providing "suitable representation" - or rejected any collective arrangement that would undermine white society.

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Table Nine

African Trade Unionism

A. Types of unionization preferred

| TUCSA | | | | Unaffiliated | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Incorp-oration | Seperate Unions | Modified Unions | Nothing | Incorp-oration | Seperate Unions | Modified Unions | Nothing |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 |

| Confederation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Incorp-oration | Seperate Unions | Modified Unions | Nothing |
| 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 |

B. Organization of African trade unions

| TUCSA | | | Unaffiliated | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In Effect | In Planning | No Plans | In Effect | In Planning | No Plans |
| 2 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 6 |

| Confederation | | |
|---|---|---|
| In Effect | In Planning | No Plans |
| 0 | 0 | 5 |

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The argument for some arrangement short of full trade union rights relied on two premises: Africans are unprepared for this responsibility or "native values" predispose the African to some other form of collective action. A Confederation union secretary commented:

> The system of works committees is not successful. It's not used by the Bantu worker. If it were used, it might have been successful to some degree. Recently, we have the amendments ... I doubt that it will prove successful. The whole system, in principle, I have nothing against it ... But I'm not going to say a trade union as such, as we know it in the Western sphere of civilization is necessarily the solution. The reason I say that, his background, the way he looks at it from his point of view. We don't know his attitude.

Outright opposition to African trade unionism was based on the fear that Africans would use this strategic position to undermine white society - in the words of one leader, "You don't give a knife to your sworn enemy; he will cut your throat". A secretary of an unaffiliated union commented in a more tactful vein:

> If I see it against the general background at the moment, I think it would be a dangerous thing for the economy as such. As I see it, if you were to say, give the control of the industrial councils ... they would be able to dictate a wage for the non-white worker which is not in keeping with his performance. Shall I say for racial or for political reasons. And that, in my opinion, would be the quickest way of destroying our economy.

There never has been much prospect that the government would alter the existing legislation to permit full incorporation - though TUCSA as a body, a number of individual TUCSA unions, and at least one unaffiliated union have pressed the government for change. In every case, these overtures were rebuffed. The unaffiliated union was told that the works committee amendments were the best that could be hoped for, an individual TUCSA union was told it would "never" achieve mult-racial trade unionism, and TUCSA was told, after an approach to the Prime Minister, that "the solution of the problem you want to discuss, lies in cooperation with the Department of Labour and that the new Bill meets the situation". None of the other trade unions have sought to press the issue (even if they were inclined to) against a certain governmental rebuff.

However, individual unions, even within the existing legislative framework,

11. Would you favour compulsory education for all groups in South Africa?

    (a) (If yes) Even if it meant higher taxes? Would your membership?

12. Would you favour changes in the Apprenticeship Act or its administration that provided more training for Africans?

13. Do you believe the gap between white and non-white wages is too large?

    (a) Would you be willing to forego sizeable salary increases in order that the gap be reduced?

14. Do you think all African workers should be guaranteed an income at least equal to the poverty datum line?

15. Do you think there will ever be a time when whites will work under non-white supervisors?

16. Are there any changes in labour law or other laws that your union would like to see brought about?

    (a) Have you ever informed a party or public official of your views on these matters?
    (b) How receptive was the government to your overtures?

17. Do you believe farmers are getting special benefits at the expense of workers?

18. What do you believe the union's attitude should be toward management?