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BLACK AND WHITE TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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Until recent years there was no native trade unionism in South Africa. The first trade unions in the country were white unions of skilled workers. Most of their members were immigrants from Britain and some of the unions, like the Amalgamated Engineering Union, were simply South African branches of organisations which had their headquarters in Britain. The membership of the white unions was and still is very largely English-speaking. During and since the war there has been an increase in the number of Dutch-speaking ^{Afrikaans} (~~African~~) workers in the unions, as a result of the drift into the towns of large numbers of landless whites from the country districts. The Afrikaner however, has been slow in taking up trade unionism and even in unions in which the rank and file is preponderatingly Dutch, such as the White ~~xxxxx~~ miners' union, the majority of organisers and officials and active members are British. However, in the younger generation of White trade unionx leaders there is an increasing number of Afrikaners.

A few of the White unions admit native and coloured members, but only in the Cape Province. Some national unions, such as the Typographical Union, have a few non-Europeans in their Cape branches, but no coloured members are allowed in the Transvaal and Orange Free State branches of the same union. A similar position exists in the Building Workers' Industrial Union. In general even in the Cape the number of non-Europeans in "White" unions is very small; often a mere handful. Exceptions are the Cape furniture workers union, which has a majority of coloured members and some branches of the building workers.

In the Transvaal the only White union which has non-European members is the Furniture Workers Union. (Secretary Comrade Kulk of the Central Executive of ~~the~~ ^{the} C.F.) This contains about 25 per

of coloured members. Natives (aboriginals) however, are not admitted, though there are a number employed in the trade.

Some of the White unions are affiliated to the South African Trade Union Congress, with headquarters at Johannesburg; some are affiliated to the Cape Federation; the majority are unaffiliated. A working agreement exists between the Cape Federation and the TUC. The total number of White trade unionists in the country is about 80,000. Of these the TUC claims not more than 20,000,

NATIVE TRADE UNIONISM. The native organisation, the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, (I.C.U.) only possesses some of the characteristics of a trade union. In reality it is a loose political organisation with an individual membership organised in territorial branches. Most of its slogans are political ones, though it has also demanded all-round increases in wages for native workers. It has so far failed to departmentalise itself and to organise particular categories of workers. The result has been its failure as a trade union, though (before the complete corruption of its leadership) it rallied large masses of native workers and peasants in a general protest against unbearable economic, social and political oppression.

Up to the end of 1926, the Communist Party had considerable influence in the executive of the I.C.U. (indeed it claims the original parentage of the I.C.U.). This influence was used to try to secure the carrying out of a more militant policy and especially the development of real trade union activity. By 1926 it was becoming obvious that unless the I.C.U. justified its existence on the industrial field, stagnation would set in. It was no use talking about strikes and promising higher wages if ~~xxxx~~ nothing was done to put this policy into practice. The I.C.U. had conducted no strikes for years. X)

X) It has only conducted 3 or 4 strikes in its whole ⁹ years of existence
And the only one of any magnitude was the dock strike of 1919.

It was becoming evident that Kadalie, the leader of the union, was not prepared to carry out the militant policy for which it had been organised.

Kadalie, whose supreme authority in the I.C.U. had previously not been challenged, found his position threatened by the presence of Communists on his executive. With the growing discontent of the members, as it became evident that Kadalie's promises of higher wages would not be fulfilled, it became necessary that something should be done. It was done! ^u November 1926 ~~the~~ ^{four} Communists on the executive were expelled and Kadalie openly began to preach "sane trade unionism" and the renunciation of the strike weapon.

Today the I.C.U. LEADERSHIP is thoroughly corrupt. The organisation is suffering from serious internal breakdown and its membership and prestige are declining, while the Natal section, the most important numerically and financially has seceded from the main body.

The Communist Party has given up its attempt to persuade the ICU to reorganise itself on a trade union basis. Instead the C.P. itself has set about the organisation of native trade unions. Already considerable successes have been achieved in this direction. The following unions are now in existence on the Witwatersrand ~~xxxxxx~~ (membership in June 1928 in brackets): Native Laundry Workers' Union (600); Clothing Workers' Union (323); Bakery Workers' Union (120); Native Transport Workers' Union (75) Mattress and Furniture Workers' Union (60).

These unions are united in the Federation of Native Trade Unions. It must be understood that these organisations are still in a very young and growing stage. Already a number of strikes have been conducted.

The most important of these from one point of view was

the strike in tailoring workshops at Germiston, near Johannesburg, in May 1928. The strike was called by the Witwatersrand Tailors' Association (a white union) as a result of the dismissal of three tailoresses who had taken an active part in organising the union. The native clothing workers, through their organisation approached the White workers with an offer to come out in their support. This offer was accepted and the 120 x native workers concerned came out on strike. The number of White strikers involved was 400. The strike was a complete success. As far as we know this is the first occasion in the history of the labour movement in South Africa on which White and Black trade unionists have cooperated in an industrial dispute.

A strike conducted by the clothing workers Union in Johannesburg did not have as fortunate a result. The native clothing workers in a certain factory went on strike as a result of the victimisation of their leader. The native workers in other factories came out in support. Altogether over 200 workers were involved. But in the tailoring industry the majority of workers are whites. The Witwatersrand Tailors Association refused to call out its members

in support in spite of the fact that their ~~xxx~~organisation had been assisted by the CWU in the Germiston dispute

The police intervened and arrested many of the strikers under the powers given ~~them~~^{by} the Urban Areas Act "for being away from work without permission". Of these 73 were sentenced to £1 fine or ten days imprisonment. Five others were prosecuted under the Riotous Assemblies Act and sentenced to fines of from £5 to £7-10 with the alternative of imprisonment from a month to six weeks. The union was forced to declare the strike-off after the men had been out for two weeks. In spite of the defeat the union has increased in strength after the return to work an indication of the growing class consciousness of the native workers. Successful strikes were conducted last month (June) by the Native Laundry Workers' Union in two laundries in Johannesburg.

The Communist Party is being inundated with requests to form trade unions from the native workers in numerous industries. At the present moment the Party is scarcely able to comply with these requests owing to the shortage of capable organisers both black and white.

The effect of the new tactic upon the I.C.U. is seen in the fact/^{that} that organisation offered its assistance to the Clothing Workers during their strike and Kadalie addressed a meeting of the strikers in the Communist Hall at Johannesburg!! Kadalie who repudiated the strike weapon!

OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE I.C.U. The C.P. attitude towards the I.C.U. is briefly as follows: The I.C.U.'s claim to be an "all-in" trade union of native workers is not justified by the facts, since the I.C.U. has consistently failed to do real trade union work among the natives. By forming industrial unions among the natives, we are not "poaching" on the I.C.U.; for the I.C.U. has never attempted to organise these workers. A few of the natives who have come into the new unions may be individual members of the I.C.U.; but that fact has no organisational significance for us; we regard the I.C.U. as a reformist political organisation with a social-democratic structure. Of course we are prepared to make a united front with the I.C.U. leadership to the extent that it is prepared to champion the cause of the native workers. For instance it would have been a wrong tactic to prevent Kadalie speaking to the native C.W.U. strikers after the I.C.U. had offered its support. Of course the opportunity presented itself to reprimand Kadalie from the same platform for his former acts of treachery and to explain to the strikers that a leader who is a friend today and an enemy tomorrow is of little value. Whether this was done or not we do not know. This meeting occurred after the delegation left South Africa. In any case it is difficult to lay down a formula for such situations.

As far as the rank and file of the I.C.U. is concerned we should try to win them over to the C.P. in the same way that the German C.P. tries to win over workers from the Social Democrats. Rank and file members of the I.C.U. should not be regarded as trade unionists: they are nothing of the kind. The C.P.S.A. should perhaps visualise the possible complete disbanding of the I.C.U. and in any case work for the exposure of its reactionary leadership. This can be and has been done under the general tactic and challenges of the united front. Native political organisations in S. Africa are in such a state of flux that any obsession with regard to the permanence of such bodies as the I.C.U. will only result in serious mistakes being made. We should not help the I.C.U. to crystallise into a solid reformist organisation. Its present state of decay and disintegration is favourable to the further growth of the Communist Party.

IN THE WHITE UNIONS. In spite of the fact that we have only a small number of ^{white} unionists in the C.P. a large proportion of our trade unionist members hold leading positions in their organisations and are on the General Council of the T.U.C. Our Party is thus able to pull a certain weight as a minority in the T.U.C. It must be understood however that there is no corresponding militant pro-native minority among the rank and file of white trade unionists. When the T.U.C. executive gives public support to the struggle of the native workers this is not due to pressure from the rank and file. On the contrary, the leaders often prove more radical than the trade union membership. Those white trade union leaders who are against the affiliation of the I.C.U. to the T.U.C. but who favour some form of cooperation between ~~the~~ black and white workers often excuse themselves by saying that the rank and file will desert the unions if the leaders pursue a pro-native policy. There is a large amount of truth in this. It is often possible to get the T.U.C. executive to pass resolutions

(e.g. the resolution endorsing the wage demands of native workers in Bloemfontein in 1925⁺) which would never stand a chance in the branch meetings of the vast majority of affiliated unions.

It is necessary to understand this difference between the leadership and the rank and file (~~the no doubt largely to lack of propaganda among the latter~~) in order to understand the reaction of the T.U.C. leaders to the I.C.U.'s application for affiliation. At the end of last year the I.C.U. applied for affiliation to the T.U.C. on the basis of 100,000 members. The T.U.C. at that time had established in conjunction with the Cape Federation a joint body known as the S.A. Trade Union Co-ordinating Committee. The question of I.C.U. affiliation was considered by this body which issued a memorandum on the subject.

The memorandum was a very carefully worded and more or less non-committal document. It pointed out that some recognition would have to be given to the growing political and industrial organisation of the native workers. At the same time ~~it~~ it declared that the affiliation of the I.C.U. on the basis of 100,000 members would enable the I.C.U. on a card vote to out weigh the combined votes of all the white unions "if a division occurred on racial lines", which eventually was thought to be very probable. It was pointed out that the I.C.U. would probably not in any case be able to pay ~~£~~5,000 ~~per~~ yearly in dues, which would be the sum necessary if affiliation took place on the basis of 100,000 members. (This statement subsequently called forth the most violent retorts on the part of the I.C.U. leaders who resented this slur upon their honesty and claimed that their organisation was in an extraordinarily sound position and quite capable of paying the sum required. The fact that four months later

+) and the protest against the ban on Kadalie in 1926.

the I.C.U. ^{was} in the midst of an internal crisis in which the officials were accusing each other of mishandling the funds of the organisation, perhaps shows that this righteous indignation was only a cloak to cover up a very unsound state of affairs within).

The memorandum suggested that the affiliation of the I.C.U. on the basis of 5,000 members might be possible. In general it favoured joint discussions between the T.U.C. and native workers organisations rather than affiliation at the present stage.

At a meeting of joint executives of the T.U.C. in January 1928 the memorandum of the Co-ordinating Committee was considered. The meeting finally by a large majority endorsed the memorandum, i.e. it was in favour of joint discussions with the I.C.U. but was against affiliation. The Communists voted for full affiliation and the extreme right wing voted against any form of cooperation with the I.C.U.

The I.C.U. in reply refused to accept the offer of joint meetings and declared that as it represented the native workers who were the majority of workers in the country it had the right to dominate any trade union federation in which it happened to be in a majority. The Johannesburg "Star" the organ of the mine-owners, came out with headlines "Native workers turned down by T.U.C." etc., though it was obvious that the T.U.C. had made what was really a forward step in making an offer for joint discussions and that the most reactionary and race-prejudiced section of white trade unionists had been defeated.

The decision of the I.C.U. not to accept the offer of the T.U.C. may be considered as a defeat of the forces favouring ^{the} united front of black and white workers. It has played into the hands of the racialists in both camps.