

# ~~The Conference of the Cape Federation~~

2/35

The Cape Federation of Trades conference which was held in Capetown over the Easter weekend deserves close attention. The Federation, ~~as it is called~~, is the central trade union body in the Cape with functions not dissimilar to those of the Trades and Labour Council in the north. It has no saving graces, however, for its officials are more reactionary and class conciliatory than those in charge of the T.L.C. The reason for this is clear. More intense industrialisation ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ in the north, clearer class issues have had their inevitable results on trade union bureaucratic leadership.

The Federation acts as the coordinating body for the majority of trade unions in the Cape Peninsula. Occasionally, as in the tramway strike three years ago, it is compelled by the pressure of the working class rank and file of an affiliated union to countenance <sup>countenance</sup> and even support direct strike action. But its policy is generally one of class collaboration, of round table conferences, of "peaceful" compromise with employers at all costs. That this policy was bound to become irksome as the crisis deepened and organised labour became threatened with wage cuts and evasions, was bound to be. The first symptoms of discontent were discernable at the 1935 annual conference.

The emergence of a left wing at the conference is noteworthy. Small though it is in numbers, weak and lacking unity, it nevertheless made its voice heard and in one instance gained sufficient support to outvote the bureaucracy. The beginnings of this left wing in the trade unions are small. The grounds for its influence are large and fertile. Even delegates to whom the class struggle is something artificial or meaningless, who regard "communists" and "communism" ~~XX~~ with suspicion if not hatred, were compelled on many occasions to agree with the strength and correctness of the left wing line. The rank and file of the trade unions represented by delegates were not present. The delegates themselves were invariably either Labour Party supporters, trade union officials or "strictly non political". The work of the few left wing comrades must be concentrated in the rank and file of the trade unions; it is there that the material for marxism is to be found. ~~But there must be cohesion, some form of united front between the left wingers, Stalinist and marxist. It was XXXXXX the lack of this XXXX particularly the lack of consultation on points of tactic that was the caused of the biggest error, a really foolish mistake at the conference.~~

Another obvious phenomenon was the conciliatory attitude adopted by the Stalinists towards the trade union bureaucracy. Points of fundamental difference were not driven home, the cleavage between the reformist and the revolutionary attitude towards current problems, Parliamentary bills, was (it appeared deliberate)

obscured or not touched on. Amid applause a representative of the F.O.S.U. extended an invitation to trade union representatives to visit the U.S.S.R. where they would be furnished with board and lodgings free. Mr. Stuart, <sup>the General Secretary</sup> who is proceeding to Geneva as the S. A. representative to the coming Labour Conference, is graciously availing himself of the kind invitation which was issued in the name of the ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Soviet Trade Unions.

There is vehemently and affirmatively no colour bar in the C.F.T. One poor coloured delegate who dared to suggest that there was a strong colour prejudice among the rank and file of his union was compelled amid an uproar of protest to withdraw that statement. A native delivered a paper on the conditions of labour and wages among the stevedoring and dock workers. But what is real and perceptible is that, besides the cleanliness from colour bar on paper and in formal speech, there is a growing feeling among organised labour that the colour bar in industry and commerce is the gravest threat to <sup>the</sup> their wage standards. Organised labour is beginning to appreciate, and the appreciation is clearer with the degree of organisation, that it is in the interests of the white workers that black workers should be in their unions and have the same rights that they have. "Labour with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labour with a black skin is branded." The lessons of the class struggle in South Africa are beginning to teach white labour the truth of Marx's statement. And when this truth is grasped by white ~~as well as black~~ labour then indeed will the ruling class tremble. Organised labour in this country is beginning to see that the biggest threat to its standards of wages is in the mass of unorganised so-called unskilled labour ~~of the natives~~ which the capitalist class is compelled, owing to its dwindling profits, to substitute for "white", "civilised" labour at the unskilled "black" wage level; that only by unity of black and white workers can the present standards of wages and conditions of labour be safeguarded and improved.

Mr. Evans, assistant secretary of the Federation & exemplified the zigzagging ~~centrism~~ of the bureaucracy. These zigzags were the direct result of the influence of the left wing delegates who were gaining support as the conference proceeded. At the first session X of the conference Mr. Evans made a plea for constitutional means. At the third session he roundly labelled the members of the S. A. Parliament as Fascists. The implication of this denunciation he did not understand. But understanding on his part was not necessary. The conference was condemning the Unemployment Benefit Bill; and Mr. Evans felt called upon to give a lead to this condemnation. He had to be in the van ~~XXXX~~ (provided things were left at the discussion stage) --- no matter where the van was going. ~~in XXXX in conversation.~~

The conference illustrated once more the reformist ~~XX~~ unmarxian divorcing of theory and practice; of resolutions (theory) and action, (practice) in watertight unrelated compartments. While condemning the Unemployment Benefit Bill and the Minimum Wage Bill,

it was not prepared to take any real action in order to translate this opposition into real effective mass action. The strongest action it was prepared to countenance was in the nature of representations to the Minister of Labour. But to obtain the mass support of the unions represented, to make clear by means of mass meetings and demonstrations of workers the threat to the working class organised and unorganised that is both implicit and explicit in these bills, to put up the collective <sup>struggle</sup> of the organised working class against these measures ---- such suggestions for action were rejected and outvoted. <sup>The result is to make the working class</sup> Leftist phrases, militant resolutions unless combined with effective action are not only useless but harmful. For they give the working class a sense of security and confidence in their trade union leadership and remove from them the urge from taking independent mass action against <sup>the working class</sup> these parliamentary measures. At no time in the history of the S. A. working class is the duty of left wing trade unionists more urgent than it ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> today to point out to the masses the need for mass action and to discredit the trade union bureaucracy.

The most important item on the agenda of the conference came towards the end when attendance was sparse and delegates were tired with three days debating. It was the resolution on Fascism. The Commercial Employees Union <sup>moved</sup> a resolution to the effect that the growing menace of Fascism demanded on the part of organised labour strong concerted opposition, and that the C.F.T. take steps to associate itself with the Anti Fascist League <sup>(Committee)</sup> and recommend its unions to affiliate. This resolution was defeated by a small majority. A resolution calling upon the C. F. T. to take independent action against the growth of Fascism was not put before the conference. This was an error. Such a resolution moved by way of an amendment would have stood a good chance of being adopted. If rejected, at least the issue would have been raised and in any event there would have been more than one string to the bow of anti fascist propaganda. If ~~it~~ adopted, it would clearly have been a step forward in the direction ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> consolidating the forces of organised labour against anti working class organisations and enactments. It would either have compelled the bureaucratic trade union leadership to act or embarrassed and exposed its weakness and reactionary role if it did not take action in terms of such a resolution.

Owing mainly to the Stalinists-- to whom the A.F. L. is the only organisation capable of fighting fascism-- this resolution was not even submitted to the conference for consideration. The issue was simple; either affiliation to the A.F.L. or no organised fight against Fascism at all. It was interesting to see that at least one of the Stalinist delegates realised too late the foolishness of not putting such an ancillary motion before the ~~the~~ conference. It was correct to vote for the C. E. U. motion for affiliation by trade union bodies to the A. F. L. <sup>(Committee)</sup> would have given it a working class basis ~~which~~ <sup>which</sup> today it does not possess. We must remember that ~~there is no~~ <sup>there is no</sup> not one union is ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup> affiliated to the A.F.L. That a mass character and working class basis would

have been given to the A. F. L. if the C. E. U. motion had been adopted is obvious. But to lose sight of the main aim which is to organise trade union opposition to Fascism is criminally foolish. It is not in the A. F. L. in which our hopes lie; it is in a mass working class opposition to Fascism. Whether this opposition is independently organised or has its outlet through the A. F. L. is not important. It is the organised fight against Fascism by the working class that is the burning question today.

A genuine revolutionary group should have seen to it that there was provision made for two attempts to ~~X~~ include the trade unions in antiX fascist activity. And this was not seen to.

*The militants in the unions must redouble their efforts. They must take the union back to their rank-and-file and stir up the workers. By putting the problems to the workers, by ~~such~~ initiating discussions within the union unions, by starting a ferment, a movement among the workers, in this way, and only in this way, can the left wing group gain influence, and successfully challenge the bureaucracy.*

"Please note that the article must definitely state that the A.F.L. is the life down branch as there is definitely Trade Unions affiliated to the Jo' Burg & Hotel - branches" only.

**Collection Number: AG2722**

**WORKER'S PARTY OF SOUTH AFRICA, 1933-1935**

**PUBLISHER:**

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

©2013

**LEGAL NOTICES:**

**Copyright Notice:** All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

**Disclaimer and Terms of Use:** Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of a collection held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa