

LECTURE 8

WORKERS' SOLIDARITY

Workers' solidarity is the heart and core of the Trade Union movement. "Unity is strength" is a proverb in all languages and is especially applicable to the organisation of the workers. Individually the worker can do little or nothing in defence of his rights or for improvements to his standards and he has learned to unite into trade unions by dint of experience often after many trials and failures, before a union is successfully launched.

But the Trade Unions which are organised cannot stand in isolation to each other. There must be co-ordination of effort just as the employers have learned in a class society to unite in employers' federations or organisations, such as the chamber of mines, the chamber of commerce, chamber of industries, etc. So, too, the trade unions have learned that it is necessary to co-ordinate their efforts for the following reasons:-

- (1) To assist workers out on strike or other struggles against employers who refuse to accede to the demands of the workers.
- (2) To assist unorganised workers to organise.
- (3) To oppose bad legislation and to promote good legislation.
- (4) To exchange experiences and to frame policies of a co-ordinated nature at conferences and meetings which will result in common efforts to obtain improvements in working conditions.
- (5) To fight for free trade unions for all and oppose any anti-democratic moves and to fight for the rights of the workers.

HOW IS CO-ORDINATION ACHIEVED:

Individual trade unions soon learn that it is impossible, for example, to regulate hours of work or general factory conditions by individual trade union action. National policy usually enters into the picture, hence this calls for national action and so the trade unions learn to come together. The Trade Unions come together by means of a national conference at which they elect a national executive committee and adopt a constitution. They discuss resolutions and frame a policy which, though not binding on individual unions, is supposed to act as a guide to the policy of the unions affiliated to the national trade union centre. The body is kept in being by means of activities centered around its work and financially, by affiliation fees paid by the unions which have joined it. Affiliated unions have the right to appeal for help when faced with difficulties such as wage negotiations, strikes, etc. The co-ordinating body may decide to oppose proposed laws and launch a campaign against them. It does the day to day work as well as taking up all issues brought to its attention.

This, in theory, is how co-ordinated bodies are presumed to function,

but we find in practice that very often differences have arisen which have led to the formation of more than one co-ordinating body in a country. For example, in the U.S.A. there were the C.I.O. and the A.F.L., with differences based on methods of organising (craft versus industrial form of organisation). In France there are three, the C.G.T., the Force Ouvriere and the Christian Trade Unions. The C.G.T. is the main body taking in all unions irrespective of politics or religion. The Force Ouvriere bans communists. The Christian trade union has a religious, Catholic, basis. But in many countries there is only one National Trade Union centre, which greatly increases the strength and power of the trade unions by this factor, e.g. the British T.U.C., the Council of the U.S.S.R. Trade Unions, etc. etc.

In South Africa, there has been ever since co-ordinating bodies of trade unions came into existence, the cardinal issue of whether African Trade Unions should be accepted or Africans organised at all. Thus the issue of Unity between white and black workers has always been the main issue in all co-ordinating movements of importance in South Africa.

The issue was raised in the S.A. Federation of Trades, and when the S.A. Trades & Labour Council was formed in 1928 it was decided, not without strong opposition, that it would allow all trade unions, registered as well as unregistered, that is white and black trade unions to affiliate. The S.A. Trades & Labour Council during its existence contributed usefully to the development of the trade union movement in South Africa, but it did not attract the African workers as it should have done. The reasons for this were that the white trade unions who were the mainstay of the S.A.T.L.C. did not encourage such affiliation, and also that the African Trade Unions had in some instances separatist views, hence the formation of Non-European Trades Councils (this attitude was encouraged by the attitude of the white Trade Unions). Hence when the Nationalist Government launched its anti-trade union attack, the S.A.T.L.C. was greatly weakened by the hiving off of unions which formed bodies like the Ko-ordineerinde Raad (a colour-bar pro Nat centre mainly working in Pretoria) then the S.A. Federation of Trade Unions which specifically excluded African Trade Unions. Eventually, the S.A. Trades & Labour Council was dissolved and most of the Unions still left in it joined hands with the majority of Unions in the S.A. Federation to set up a new co-ordinating movement entitled the S.A. Council of Trade Unions with about 150,000 affiliated members in unions which have joined it. This new body denies the right of African Trade Unions to affiliate to it. At the same time the other two co-ordinating bodies are still in existence. As a result of the going out of existence of the S.A. Trades & Labour Council a new organisation was born, the S.A. Congress of Trade Unions, which aims to unite

and co-ordinate the Trade Unions of South Africa irrespective of race or colour and which aims specifically to unite the white and black working class of South Africa into one solid national centre.

The task of the South African Congress of Trade Unions is indeed a mighty one, for it is committed to organise the vast army of workers in South Africa the majority of whom are as yet unorganised into trade unions.

The South African Congress of Trade Unions came into being as a result of a prolonged and bitter struggle between various Trade Unions affiliated to the late S.A.T. & L.C. , recognising the need for unity between Black and White workers progressives within the S.A.T. & L.C. continuously advocated a policy of encouraging African Trade Unions to affiliate to it, as well as of organising the unorganised workers.

As a result of the policy of opportunism which was permitted to dominate the S.A.T.C. & L.C., those elements who followed a policy of appeasement to the Government succeeded in dissolving the Council in October, 1954.

With the dissolution of the S.A.T. & L.C. and the formation of the South African Trade Union Council which debarred African Trade Unions from membership to it a new home, free from the manoeuvrings of hostile elements had to be found. The need for a new militant non colour bar trade union centre capable of correctly leading the working class was of major importance.

This requirement was given expression to on March 5th, 1955, when 35 Trade Unions representing 41,000 workers met to form the South African Congress of Trade Unions and adopted a constitution.

Embodying a declaration of principles which clearly stated that the interests of all workers are alike, whether they be European or Non-European, African, Coloured, Indian, English, Afrikaans or Jewish, and that the S.A.C.T.U. shall strive to unite all workers in its ranks, without discrimination and without prejudice determinedly seeking to further and protect the interests of all workers with the universal guiding motto of working class solidarity.

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TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand

Location:- Johannesburg

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