

26th June 1930

THE ORGANISATION OF NATIVE WORKERS.

At the conference of the Trades and Labour Council held in Durban last Easter, there was an interesting debate on a motion which proposed, in effect, that organised European labour definitely commence to organise the native workers in industry. The debate revealed that the majority of the delegates, while declaring that they were in complete sympathy with "the underlying principle" were nevertheless not prepared to make a beginning with this task.

"I believe", said one speaker, "that the native workers have a perfect right to organise themselves, and we should lend them all moral assistance possible." This expresses an attitude typical of the majority of delegates present. There is facile talk of "rights", of the "moral" side of the question and in general a sentimental viewpoint is substituted for a bold realistic facing of this problem which grows daily ever more pressing.

The position in the baking trade throws a good deal of light on the question. Figures for the baking industry in the Witwatersrand District show that approximately equal numbers of European and Native workers are engaged in baking, but on deeper investigation we notice that the vast majority of the European employees are engaged as vanmen, in distribution, while the actual baking of the bread, etc, is in the hands of Native employees. The reason for this is obvious. The side of bread manufacture which the European consumers and shopkeepers see is the distributing side, and "public opinion" compels the master-bakers to employ white labour on the vans, but in the unseen workshops native labour predominates.

When in March 1922 a general strike was declared, the European "bakers" came out with their fellow workers. But the strike of the "bakers" meant only that buyers had to go to the bakery gates to buy bread, instead of obtaining it from the vans or shops. The native bakers were not organised and naturally continued baking bread.

The general strike was a failure mainly because this feature is present throughout industry. The separation from of white worker from native worker makes of the latter unconscious scab. The gold mines continued producing almost as usual, and this fact alone guaranteed the collapse of the strike. Throughout secondary industry the unorganised natives were used by the bourgeoisie as strike-breakers.

In the light of these bitter experiences, the short sighted attitude of the trade union leaders bewilders us until even we realise that the leadership of the European trade unions is in the hands of bureaucrats, who, like bureaucrats the world over, take the short view of the situation.

It is of course not expected that individual trade union secretaries should consider the task of protecting the interests of the workers in general as their own particular concern. Nevertheless, the workers have a right to expect that the Trades and Labour Council which exists for the purpose of "coordinating the aims and activities and promoting the interests of the organised workers throughout South Africa," shall take up a realistic and not a sentimental attitude to this burning question.

A glance at the composition of the Trades and Labour Council reveals immediately why the Council votes down any motion that may bind it to take definite steps towards organising the masses of unorganised native workers. The four biggest unions are affiliated on the following basis:-

S. A. Typographical Union.....	2500
Building Workers' Industrial Union.....	1500
Amalgamated Engineering Union.....	1600
S. A. Reduction Workers' Union.....	1022
association	Total
	6,602

1

though

2

The total affiliation of the South African Trades and Labour Council is 12,477, and since more than half of these come from the "Big Four", it is they who control the policy of the Council. Moreover, in printing, building, engineering, and reduction works, native workers are totally excluded from all except unskilled work, and the European skilled workers in these trades have but little to fear from the employment of natives as scabs.

The domination of the "Big Four" in the Council commits the Council to a policy founded on the interests of the topmost layer of the working class, the skilled aristocracy of labour. The 29 medium and small unions, even if they voted together in a bloc, would be defeated on a card vote; and it is these smaller industrial groupings of workers who are in mortal danger from the use of native labour for strike breaking, although most of their delegates to the conference showed that they were oblivious of this.

The recent replacement of striking spinners in the textile mills by native workers is an ominous warning of the dangers of the situation, dangers which the petty trade union bureaucrats cannot and will not see unless the rank and file of the unions are awakened. To penetrate into the unions, pointing out the dangers of the present position and agitating for the inclusion of native workers in the existent unions, this is the imperative task that faces class conscious workers in the immediate future.

to be held in Colaba - The Union

③ opposed to the use of native labour for strike-breaking purposes

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