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LLM

LECTURE 5.

TRADE UNIONS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION IN SOUTH AFRICA.

1. In the previous lectures we have been discussing the need for the workers in any country to unite in a strong Trade Union movement for the protection and advancement of their special interests as employees: as propertyless people who have nothing to sell but their labour-power. But conditions vary from one country to another. In some countries the factories, mines, etc., have been made public property. In those countries the workers are not working for any boss but themselves. That is to say, the state is the employer, and the workers run the state. In such countries the Trade Unions do not have to "struggle" against the "employers" for higher wages and shorter hours. (How can they fight against themselves)? There the Trade Unions' task is not only to raise the material, cultural, health and educational standards of their members, but also to co-operate in raising production; for more production leads not to higher profits for any individual but to a higher standard of living for the workers.
  
2. In other countries (e.g. Britain and America) Private employers own the means of production. The workers through their trade unions are engaged in constant conflict with these employers over the division of the fruits of their labour. This struggle is conducted through negotiations between the Workers' leaders and the bosses, frequently leading to strikes and lock outs. But the workers in these countries have found that they cannot confine themselves to "economic" struggle. The employers, as a class, have vast power in the State. If they had their way they would make the trade unions illegal (this was done in Britain, through the "Anti-combination laws") or pass laws to prevent the workers electing militant leaders (this occurs in America in South Africa today, through the "Taft-Harley law" and the suppression of Communism Act.) The organised labour movement has to enter the political field --to counteract anti-labour legislation, and ultimately, to aim at the social ownership of the means of production (Socialism) which is the only way, in the end, to destroy the stranglehold of the capitalist class over the state machine. In England the Trade Unions built up the labour party. In America, not so advanced, they lend their support to individual capitalist politicians who promise to work for better labour laws.
  
3. There is a third group of countries (especially in Africa and parts of Asia and South America) where the workers are still worse off. In these countries, foreign imperialist have followed military conquest by political and economic domination. They have seized the rich natural resources (minerals, forests, etc.) and the best land. The peasants are forced off the remaining land (by hunger, taxation, etc.) to work for the invaders. They are convicted by tens of thousands for petty artificial offences and sentenced to work without pay. They are indentured

separated from their families, kraaled in compounds and locations, and constantly restricted and terrorised by armed police as if they were prisoners of war. Naturally, under such conditions, the wages and living standards of the workers are terribly low. They live in bad houses, without proper social services (health, education, etc.) They do not get enough food to eat. Their lives are short and comfortless. In these countries the Trade Unions are suppressed and constantly persecuted. The workers are forbidden by law to strike. When the workers demand higher wages and other improvements, it is regarded as sedition and mutiny. The employers do not want to negotiate, but rush to call the police. The workers do not have any political rights. They cannot vote to put in a better Government, because all power is in the hands of the imperialists. Countries in this third group are known as colonial countries. Trade Unions in these countries have as their first political task to get rid of the imperialists and establish democratic States. They are not alone in this task. The peasants, and even the "native" capitalists also suffer under the imperialists. So the workers must join hands with them. But the peasant does not usually see much further than his own piece of land. And the capitalist or businessman is mostly worried about his profits. So if the national liberation movement is to be successful, the workers must lead others.

4. To which of these three groups of countries does South Africa belong? Clearly, not to the first (Socialist) group. Do we belong to group two, or group three? The answer is, partly to both. On the economic field a very large proportion of control over South Africa's major industries is in the hands of foreign imperialists. Ever since the Boer War, British capitalist interests held unchallenged supremacy, especially in such fields as gold and diamond mining, heavy engineering, etc. Since the second World War, this supremacy has been increasingly threatened by American Investment, which today has a dominant position in uranium mining, in the new O.F.S. gold mines and in a very large selection of other S.A. Industries and businesses. (See new Age articles):

which give very interesting details of the growth of U.S. influence in S.A. Compare also the recent acquisition of the Schlesinger "empire" by U.S. capital. On the other hand, local interests also hold very considerable shares in mining, agriculture and secondary industry. But this share is limited to members of the dominant white minority.

5. This state of economic affairs is reflected in the political structure of the Union. Although a part of the British Empire and acknowledging the sovereignty of the Queen, South Africa has its own elected Parliament which is entitled to make laws on all matters concerning the Government and foreign policy of the Union. But membership and (with a few insignificant exceptions, fast disappearing) franchise rights in the election of

this parliament are restricted to the white group. There is a sharp contrast between the political and economic status of the members of this group and that of the non-whites majority. The former group have a status analogous to that of citizens of a "group two" capitalist country. The latter have a characteristically colonial status and are subjected to all the hardships described in paragraph 3 above. It is the aim of the Nationalist Government to widen this gulf between these two sections of the population as much as possible. Apartheid cannot and does not seek to raise the living standards of the white group, but it does seek to check the advancement of the African people and drive them back to semi-slavery, and to eliminate intermediate groups (the Indian and the coloured) and reduce them to the status of the Africans. It seeks to consolidate the whole of the white population behind this policy, which is designed to facilitate, intensify and secure the exploitation of the people and resources of our country by foreign and local capitalists in mining agriculture and industry. On the other hand, it is in the interests not only of the non-White people, but of the white middle-class and working people as well to work for the reversal of this policy. They should work for the abolition of the restrictive colour-bar structure and the establishment of the people's democracy, able to provide a future of freedom, independence and higher living standards for all.

6. The trade union movement in this country has been moulded by special conditions prevailing in South Africa. (See "Comrade Bill"), and, for a brief sketch, the December 1954 issue of "Liberation"). Traditionally, the labour and the trade union movement strives to unite workers of all races and nationalities in a coming struggle against the employing class. While a section of the movement has always sought to carry forward this policy in South Africa, another section has rejected it in favour of one of collaboration between the white workers and their employers to gain privileges for the former and bigger profits for the latter through the intensive exploitation of African labour. The advent of the nationalist government has strengthened this latter section. The liquidation of the former T & LC with its nominally non-racial constitution and the formation of the openly colour-bar TUC, are indications of a move to the Right, facilitated by the Government's intervention to oust experienced and capable militant leaders from the movement, and hastened by the cowardice of the opportunist leaders in the face of attack. On the other hand, the reactionary Government, in its drive for cheap labour and higher profits, inevitably attacks the workers' living standards, leading them increasingly to seek for increased unity of all workers, irrespective of race or colour, and developing new militant leaders among their ranks. This more important historical movement finds its expression in the emergence of the SACTU, a far more militant and principled body than TCL ever was.

7. Opportunist and militant trends do not develop "automatically" in the trade union movement. The opportunist trend grows out of the position of relatively "sheltered" workers in the imperialist countries, who are appeased to some extent by the employing class, out of the "super-profits" which the latter derives from the exploitation of colonial resources and cheap labour. The essence of opportunism in the labour movement is an alliance between the capitalists and the "aristocracy of labour" for the maintenance of imperialism. This situation is reflected organisationally in the type of bureaucratic trade union dominated by office routine and legal formalities, partly merged with the state machine (the civil service). Such unions, as in Britain and the U.S.A., cease to act as weapons of the workers in the class struggle and become tools of the enemy class. Their slogan is "no politics" they sit on the workers' urgent demands, cease to educate the workers, on the field of international affairs, their leaders strive to disrupt world workers' unity (e.g. the ICFTU). In contrast to such organisations, colonial workers in particular must strive to build up unions of a democratic type, based upon an informed and active rank and file membership, sensitive to the needs and demands of the workers in the factories, educating their membership in trade unionism and striving for international trade union unity.

8. Such a movement can only be built up soundly if, rejecting the false slogan of "no politics", the trade unions enter actively into the political life of the country, taking up the political demands for freedom of the workers, and participating at the head of the national liberation movement. What does this imply in South Africa? It means, in the first place, that the unions must mobilise their members against the specifically anti-labour measures which hamper and restrict the workers in their attempts to organise themselves for higher living standards. It must fight against pass laws and the industrial colour bar. It must fight the native labour Act, the IC Bill and all other laws which are designed to cripple and bleed the African unions. But over and above this, the trade unions must understand that these laws themselves are part and parcel of the whole vicious undemocratic structure of the union, which is deliberately designed to keep labour cheap.

9. The principal aim of the trade union movement therefore must be the replacement of the present cheap labour colonial structure with a democratic people's structure as envisaged by the Freedom Charter. The members of all unions should carefully study the charter, and win their fellow-workers to fight for it. The South African Congress of Trade Unions should take a leading part in the nation wide campaign to popularise and implement the Charter. The unions should adopt the Charter as their own programme and the basis upon which they can win new members and strength. (The Lecture should end with a detailed discussion of the charter, point by point).

READING:

RP. Dutt, Crisis of Britain and the Empire. Comrade Bill, Kotane, South Africa way forward. Articles referred to in text.

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**TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961**

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