

PRECIS OF SPEECH BY AURET VAN HEERDEN, NUSAS PRESIDENT (COMMENT CONT)

"30 Years of discriminatory legislation is about to be rolled back. 30 years in which the black worker, hedged about with legal restrictions, was reduced to a voteless, voiceless, rightless, temporary cog in South Africa's economic machine." (Sunday Times - 6/5/79)

Response to the Wiehahn Commission has generally been favourable among newspapers, opposition politicians and business people. Certainly, a superficial reading could lead one to think that the structures which coerce and control black workers today are being dismantled. I will seek to show, however, how those structures are in fact being extended.

Why was such a commission necessary in the first place? Firstly, South Africa is facing an industrial relations crisis. The state has always excluded black workers from any effective participation in the industrial relations system. This formal exclusion has not prevented black workers from organising themselves into trade unions to represent and protect themselves. The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union in the 20's, CNETU in the 30's and 40's, SACTU in the 50's, FOFATUSA in the 60's and FOSATU in the late 70's have represented between 50 000 and 150 000 workers. The government established works committees on the other hand, failed dismally only 24 being established in over 20 years!

Secondly, this failure has been accompanied by a growth in numbers of African professional, clerical, white-collar technical and non-manual labourers, from 8,66% of the workforce in 1969 to 12,85% in 1977. Asians in this category rose from 34,21% to 40,89% and Coloureds from 16,80% to 24,78%. At the same time, whites in this category rose only 2,5%. The black workers have risen in importance and bargaining power, necessitating a new deal. This deal involves the selective access to privileges as well as the removal of ideological and legislative stumbling blocks to their upward mobility and expansion.

Finally, we have the severe international pressure on South Africa which can only be reduced if we are seen to 'liberalise'.

Wiehahn then set out to resolve these problems, but all he's managed to do is reveal them.

### The Black Buffer Strategy

Central to the report, this involves the incorporation of a minority of the black population into institutions which cannot challenge the status quo. The homeland bureaucracies, bodies such as the CRC and the community councils would all be examples of this strategy. In addition, by giving certain sections of the black population access to urban residential rights, freehold rights, Council voting rights trading licences and bank loans, it is hoped that they will put their pay packets before politics and form a buffer between the militancy of the mass of black workers and the security of the white elite.

### Incorporation of Trade Unions into the Structure defined by the State

The Industrial Conciliation Act which does not include Africans under the definition of employee, already makes extensive provision for control of white, coloured and Indian workers. Inter alia it provides for the annual auditing of financial affairs and the submission of statements of income and expenditure to the Labour Department the submission of annual reports to the Dept, and strict control of constitutions and membership and a prohibition on affiliation to any political party. Wiehahn proposes to incorporate African workers into the all-embracing system of control and discipline, rendering African unions accountable to the state as regards all aspects of their activities. The report recommends registration of unions. The Industrial

Registration would have dictatorial powers to decide on what constitutes a bona fide union. Non-registration is subject to severe restrictions which would make it impossible for any union to survive. Once registered, unions would be subject to a system of 'rule by proclamation'. The minister, through the National Manpower Commission, will have control of a) Industrial Relations training - such training forms an essential part of any democratic trade union and monitoring by the NMC poses a serious threat to the independence of trade union organisation.

b) Contract workers and frontier commuters who are being defined as "non-employees."

c) Trade Union elections - in keeping with the principle of "self - governance" the NMC will 'keep the ... election or appointment of persons to responsible positions in trade unions under surveillance...' (white paper 6.3)

d) Prohibition on Political activities - again this discretion could lead to an infringement of a unions right to pursue the best interests of its members, for particularly as the dividing line between economics and politics is non-existent.

The Wiehahn Commission Report then sets out a strategy of increased control of black workers by incorporating a buffer class while regulating and monitoring the activities of independent black unions who would be forced to operate within structures defined by the state. This means an extension and intensification of state control rather than any genuine moves in the direction of industrial democracy.