

# Whither black trade unions?

Anne Adams

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*This interview was conducted in Durban before the introduction in parliament of the Industrial Conciliation Amendment Bill, which makes provision for black trade unions, shorn of their migrant and commuter members — about half the total work force — and dependent for registration upon the non-application of a veto by other trade unions.*

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*Q: What would be the advantage to commerce and industry if black trade unions were recognized?*

A: The unions provide the only proven way of reconciling differences of interest between management and labour. Since they are the workers' own chosen organization, with resources and expertise independent of management, they can establish agreements more effectively and with greater credibility than any other organisation. It would be naive to expect all problems to disappear, but they would be controlled and vocalized and resolved by registration and bargaining.

*Q: And the social and political advantages to the country as a whole that would flow from black trade union recognition?*

A: Workers of one form or another are always a very significant proportion of the population and have clearly identifiable common problems. Unions which represented them would form an organisational link between workers and the rest of society. The basis for a stable and working democracy depends on the voicing and channelling of frustrations. Trade unions would form this channel.

*Q: The government has made much of the liaison committee as being a very successful way of transmitting worker problems in a firm. What, in your experience, are the disadvantages of these liaison committees?*

A: It does not take much to realise that the liaison committees can never be independent of management. Workers on these committees are always dependent on management for their jobs and cannot match management's resources, education and training. Instead of bargaining with independent power, they are forced to plead with management. They lose credibility and quickly come to be seen as essentially management stooges.

*Q: You must come across many misconceptions about black trade unions. What are the most prevalent and thorny?*

A: One definite thorny misconception relates to the belief that unions will be used for political ends. Here the emphasis is misleading. Black trade

unions will have their hands full trying to redress the present situation for African workers: this will be a full-time job. However, one must accept that in a society where every critical voice gets silenced, but where the frustrations get worse, people will seek any avenue to have their voices heard. But we should be absolutely clear that this has nothing to do with unionism: it is a product of the wider political inequality of our society. The point is that unions are a means of creating a stable and democratic society, which we should all be working towards.

*Q: How about those who say that Africans are not ready for trade unions?*

A: Plain rubbish! For the last 60 years Africans have continually organised trade unions against both state and employer opposition.

*Q: And then, of course, there are those who point to Britain and say: 'Look what the unions are doing there. They must be dangerous.'*

A: Well, there is a great deal to say here, but there are two important points. The British unions are not nearly as bad as our Press likes to paint them. We never, of course, hear the union side of it. In any event, the dread British strike fever is, firstly, not as bad as many other countries and, secondly, does not lose Britain as much production as the common cold or time lost through accidents.

The second point is that British management has been short-sighted. In the past it has cultivated a relationship with union officials and has tried to get the bargaining as far away from the work place as possible. It is looking to the unions to play a grand personnel department function. With time this served to drive a wedge between union officials and rank-and-file. Increasingly it was the shop stewards whom workers turned to to fill the gap. But management was not prepared to talk to them and the result was open conflict in many cases.

*Q: So management's hopes of tame union officials being an extension of their personnel department have not been fulfilled?*

A: No! Quite rightly! The workers must have direct worker representatives and an independent union to look after them in the work place.