

# A stabilising force

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**I**N SOUTH AFRICA today, the term 'trade union' has almost become a dirty word. The mere mention of trade unions provokes in many people thoughts of powerful groups with the evil intention of destroying the economy, disrupting progress and seeking to control the country.

In this respect, the most often maligned country is Great Britain, which has become synonymous in people's minds with strikes, inferior production, resistance to technological advancement, and lack of desire to work — the Communists are taking over! Before illustrating the needs for trade unions in South Africa, it is important to investigate these myths.

Are trade unions threatening Britain? Firstly, Britain is not merely a collection of islands in the North Sea, but a nation of people, the majority of whom are workers. The struggle, therefore, for better working conditions, is in the interest of the majority of the population and of consequential benefit to the country as a whole. The trick of ideology is to equate the nation, the country, with the interests of management only.

According to Hyman in his book 'Strikes': 'In 1970 when strike days reached a new post-war peak, the total was just over 10 million. By contrast, industrial accidents cost 20 million working days. An unemployment level near the million mark, is the equivalent of well over 200 million working days. In recent years loss of time through certified sickness has accounted for over 300 million working days'.

Therefore, other factors pose a far greater threat to the country's economy. The notoriety of strikes, promoted by the Press, has created the impression that workers are holding management to ransom (expressed in print, of course, as holding the nation to ransom) and 'unfairly' taking from the property of the owners. But in the last hundred years the basic distribution of wealth in Britain has not altered. As in the 19th century, the division of annual wealth between wages and profits remains fundamentally the same. Between 55 and 60 per cent goes on wages and between 40 and 50 per cent on profits.

Additional blows to the British economy have been the break up of the British Empire and the oil crisis which, as a result of her almost total reliance on OPEC, has had a far greater effect on Britain than on her international trading

competitors. The tremendous debt brought about by the Second World War, has been another blow to the British economy.

As far as the public image of trade unions is concerned, the South African Press, representing as it does mainly big business interests, has never had much sympathy for the trade union movement and, with a few exceptions, has aided and abetted in presenting a distorted image of trade unions to the public.

By over-emphasising the alleged inequities of British trade unions (which, incidentally, are only about sixth in the world 'strike league') and insinuating that the British trade unions in turn are controlled by the Communists, the Press has created public distrust and suspicion of trade unions in this country, and a fear that our own trade unions will become too powerful.

There is no doubt that Communists are active within the trade unions in Britain, where the Communist Party is allowed to operate freely, but the real trade union leadership is opposed to Communism, and the Communist Party has had no apparent success in winning parliamentary seats. This is surely an indication that the Communists are not taking over Britain.

It has been a common error in the past to transfer the European model of trade unions to the South African situation, which can be shown to be both structurally and historically different.

The basis of stability in the British society is an ideology which has the support of the majority who want to maintain the system, because they believe in it. Individuals are protected from unemployment, ill health and intrusion into their rights.

The image of the police force is the kindly, helpful British Bobby, there to assist you, whilst leaving you in no doubt as to his ability to protect you and handle what disorder may come his way. The handling of strikes and demonstrations by the British police is **not always done** very sympathetically, but this in no way undermines the esteem in which they are held by the population.

The Labour Party, which is at present the Government in Britain, differs only marginally in practise from the Conservative Party. The Labour Party has only superficially promoted the



interests of the workers, and in spite of its policies, has supported and maintained capitalism.

The trade union movement in Britain is highly developed, and its leadership strongly influences the Labour Party, having direct contact with the Government. The difference in popularity of the two parties is so marginal that, whichever happens to be the Government, has to appeal to the large group in the middle whose support is entirely floating, and the people generally have faith in the overall political system.

Britain has in many ways made great technological advancements and there is no abject poverty. There is universal suffrage and British society is largely ethnically homogeneous. Racial conflict is not legally promoted and where it occurs, it is between individuals.

The people of Britain have liberal rights and freedom of speech, movement and association.

By contrast, the South African society spawns one crisis of ideology after another. The ideology of apartheid has become transparent, even to some of its most staunch former supporters, who now see it as the discriminatory repressive agent that it is, offering no hope for the future.

There is a crisis of ideology in religion. Black churches are moving away from the white churches because the blacks feel that the white Christian has failed to identify with him in his suffering. White churches are themselves divided as to what action, if any, should be taken.

The South African police are no longer regarded as the upholders of peace, law and order, but have become the symbol of violence, oppression and terror particularly since June 16. All too often Blacks are arrested and branded as criminals for minor offences such as not carrying a pass, which can hardly be considered a crime. Is this not a crisis in the ideology of law and order?

For various reasons, the trade union movement, which has been in existence in South Africa since the late 19th century, is not highly developed. One reason is that the greater proportion of workers being black are excluded from belonging to registered unions.

Technology, although fairly advanced in South Africa, is not as advanced as in Britain and there is a great disparity in the distribution of wealth here, compounded by the fact that it is largely the whites that control the wealth, while almost all poverty is confined to the blacks.

The voting franchise in South Africa is restricted to a small percentage of the population giving no voice to the blacks, who constitute the majority of impoverished workers.

The Government policy of separating people into ethnic groups creates conflict by encouraging these groups to promote their own interest at the expense of another, and preventing individuals from discovering the similarity of needs, wants and ideals amongst all people.

The liberal rights of a South African are becoming increasingly restricted, making the urgent task of recognising, facing and attempting to solve all these crises almost impossible. The highly explosive situation in which we find ourselves today could be defused by the immediate establishment of non-racial trade unions.

The majority of black workers in SA are frustrated because of their powerless position in every situation, and their exclusion from many of the material benefits of this society. They have very few rights and almost no job security. There is little difference between the employed, unemployed and students, as there is general mass discontent, and the consequence of all this is a readiness to turn to ideas which threaten the social fabric.

In times of depression, such as we are facing now, workers are threatened by the unemployed, and historically trade unions have served as a stabilising force.

By recognising trade unions, the worker would have a stake in the negotiating machinery which secures industrial peace. He would have a significant stake in the country's economy as a result of higher wages, security of employment and improved living standards, all of which are essential if long-term stability is to be maintained. The issues dealt with by the trade unions are specific and are essentially economic; these contrast sharply with the generality and diffusion of issues which have arisen in the townships with the students.

Many people fear that trade unions are going to challenge the capitalist society. Historically this has never happened and it never will happen as trade unions are fundamentally defensive institutions not aggressive institutions. Trade unions have neither the machinery nor the organisation to either challenge or overthrow the State.

We are often told that what South Africa needs is a 'stable, middle-class black population'. There is no time left for us to create this, but there is time to create a non-racial united workforce that will do much for race relations in our strife-torn country. And when blacks see that through these non-racial trade unions economic change can be brought about, there will be some hope in their hearts, for it is hope we all need to face the future, in our beloved land.

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## TIDY WAR?

**WE** will fight to the last drop of blood to maintain an orderly community.

— from the report of an election speech by Mr P. W. Botha