

In the previous issues of FOSATU Worker News we have seen how the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) grew to 158 000 strong (mainly in the Transvaal) in 1945, and then quickly collapsed (Part Fourteen). We also saw how the non-racial Trades and Labour Council finally split in 1953/4 over the issue of whether to admit or to co-operate with African workers (Part Thirteen). The majority of its members went into TUCSA, but 14 of its left-wing industrial unions decided to form a new federation. The new federation was called SACTU (The South African Congress of Trade Unions). Its Inaugural Congress took place on March 5 1955.

At the beginning 31 trade unions affiliated to SACTU — the 14 that we have just mentioned from the TLC, and the rest from CNETU who brought with them only 15 000 members. Total membership was 37 203. All of the affiliates were industrial unions, and a number of the most important of these were registered.

SACTU immediately committed itself to political struggle. In fact it went further than this. Other trade unions before it had taken up political issues, and had joined with political parties like the ANC in campaigns. SACTU, however, decided to enter a formal alliance with some of the main organisations struggling for national liberation at the time. These were the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the Coloured Peoples Congress (previously the Coloured Peoples Organisation) and the white Congress of Democrats (COD). Together with SACTU these formed the Congress Alliance which was discussed in Part Fourteen.



*The Foundation Conference of the South African Congress of Trade Unions on March 5 1955*

# The making of the W

**W**hy did SACTU take this step? Did it advance or set back the workers' cause? SACTU argued that trade union rights would not be secured without first winning political rights. The policy adopted at its Inaugural Congress noted that: The SA Congress of Trade Unions is conscious of the fact that the organising of the mass of the workers for these demands (ie basic worker rights)...is inextricably bound up with a determined struggle for political rights and for liberation from all oppressive laws and practices. Every move of the workers for their basic rights in South Africa is hampered by general legislation affecting their right of movement, their right of domicile, their lack of political representation. Every struggle of the workers for higher wages, for better working conditions, even for the smallest advance in factory conditions...is immediately met by the full force of the Police State organised to restrict every civil human right.

SACTU also believed that by working in alliance with the nationalist parties it could increase its membership and its strength. Later writers and trade unionists have disagreed. They argue that SACTU became subordinated to non working class interests in the alliance, and that SACTU's participation also allowed it to be smashed by the State.

**L**et us look at the factors influencing SACTU's decision. Perhaps the most important of these was the weakness of SACTU at the time of its foundation. Thirty-two thousand members is not many and well over half of these were in three trade unions — the Food and Canning Workers Union, the Textile Workers Industrial Union and the National Union of Laundry, Cleaning and Dyeing Workers (each of these unions was closely linked to an unregistered African parallel union). Most of the rest of the unions were tiny, and

there was often more than one SACTU affiliate organising the same industry. For example, in the chemical industry, there was the registered Chemical Workers Industrial Union with 210 members, the Chemical and Allied Workers Union, Natal, also with 210 members and the African Chemical Workers Union with 564 members.

The ANC on the other hand was rapidly growing in strength. After the 1952 Defiance Campaign its membership had grown to around 100 000 and it enjoyed widespread popular support. SACTU leadership, therefore, looked to the ANC as an elder brother — for protection and support.

The second factor influencing SACTU's thinking was the difficulty it had organising the factories. Under a law passed in 1953 strikes were illegal. Later in the 1950's stop orders for African workers were also prevented. Both employers and the police were extremely hostile to African trade unions, and regularly

victimised militant workers and shop stewards. SACTU, therefore, decided it had to build strong factory floor organisation (Previously most African trade unions had not been strongly organised on the factory floor).

It deliberately used political campaigns as a way of recruiting factory militants. In Natal, for example, the Congress of the People Campaign in 1955 was used as a way of starting factory committees.

The third factor that influenced SACTU's thinking was the growing militancy of African workers. In 1956 and 1957 strikes involving African workers broke out all over the country. Other kinds of popular struggles (eg bus boycotts) became increasingly common. The most important of these was the 1957 Alexandra bus boycott which was organised after Putco increased fares by one penny. The entire population of Alexandra boycotted the buses for 14 weeks walking 19 miles to and from work each day.

**S**ACTU feared this wave of militancy was passing it by. At the second congress, SACTU's



*The Executive Committee of SACTU's general secretary*

# PART FIFTEEN: SACTU AND THE CONGRESS ALLIANCE



Pass offenders — found by their families in the Eastern Transvaal and brought back in the sacks given to them as working clothes

# WORKING CLASS

president argued that 'failure on our part to act as the spearhead of the working class in its fight for wage in-

creases and a happier life can only lead to the defeat of the magnificent unity that exists today'.

SACTU therefore decided to start a mass campaign. Together with the ANC it called a national stayaway in

1957 and again in 1958. The first of these was more successful than the second. After the 1958 stayaway it was clear that a number of real problems had emerged:

- the day to day organisation of factories through effective factory committees was seriously neglected at times, as large amounts of energy were spent on political issues (eg stayaway campaigns).

- the organisations of strategic sectors of the economy like engineering and mining was delayed.

- SACTU often could not impose a sufficient working class direction on the Alliance. This was clear in the organisation of the 1958 stayaway which SACTU itself later criticised. SACTU's criticisms here were that unwinnable political demands (like 'the Nats must go') were added to winnable workers demands (like 'one pound a day') so that neither workers nor employers nor the government took the demands seriously. It therefore became no more than a protest demonstration.

- SACTU played a leading role in organising the stayaway but the ANC called it off after only one day without consulting SACTU. SACTU therefore only seemed to be a junior partner in the alliance.

Both SACTU and the ANC took steps to correct these problems. In the 1958 conference, for example, the ANC president, Albert Luthuli, coined the slogan 'SACTU the Spear: ANC the Shield' which suggested a leading role for SACTU. In 1959-60 real progress began to be made in the organisation of the engineering sector. By 1961 SACTU's membership had increased to 51 000 grouped into 51 unions.

However, in 1960 the ANC was banned, and shortly afterwards started a sabotage campaign. Many SACTU leaders became involved in this, mixing 'underground' with 'open' activities. This gave the police the excuse to attack SACTU and its affiliates. By 1964, SACTU was destroyed as an effective trade union organisation.



African Laundry Workers Union — in the middle at the back is John Gaetsewe,