

# Suspect solidarity:

Over the past decade, the US-based American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations has been widely criticised for its programmes in South Africa. The AFL-CIO and its regional branch, the African-American Labour Centre, have been accused of trying to divide the South African labour movement and of having links to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

As a result of criticism from within South Africa and the United States, the AALC has been modifying its approach to make itself seem more acceptable to the South African trade union movement.

## Early years of the programme

Like the US government, the AFL-CIO has a history of fervent anti-communism. At the end of World War II, the American labour federation began funding European trade unions which were anti-communist in orientation, often at the expense of radical unions which had more popular support. During the early 1960s, the federation expanded its international programmes and established

## *changes in AFL-CIO's South Africa programs*

EILEEN FLANAGAN traces the changing policies of the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) towards the South African trade union movement, in particular COSATU. From initially supporting splinter unions and the Inkatha union UWUSA, the AFL-CIO has come under pressure to use a more subtle strategy to influence COSATU. While the union movement can benefit from this new attitude, this article argues, it is also potentially more harmful.

three regional centres to implement its foreign policies: the American Institute for Free Labour Development (AIFLD) for Latin America; the Asian-American Free Labour Institute (AAFLI); and the African-American Labour Centre (AALC).

All three centres are primarily funded by the Agency for International Development (AID), a branch of the US government closely linked to the State Department. All three have also been accused of having close ties to the CIA, particularly AIFLD which has been linked to numerous CIA operations in Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

Although the AALC had sponsored programmes throughout Africa since 1964, their involvement in South Africa before the 1970s was minimal. The events of the 1970s made it obvious that organised black workers were an important force for change in the region. Fearful of the possibility of socialist revolution in South Africa, both the US government and the AFL-CIO began to take a strong interest in the South African labour movement. Both wished to encourage 'peaceful change' in South Africa and American style 'business unionism', which emphasises wage gains and workers' rights within the capitalist system. Thus, in



1981, the AFL-CIO announced that it was launching a 'Programme of Action in Support of Black Trade Unions in South Africa', to be run by the AALC and funded primarily by AID.

### South African unionists suspicious

From its creation, the Programme of Action was met with animosity and suspicion by black South African trade unionists. Articles appeared in the South African press describing the links between the CIA and AFL-CIO programmes in other parts of the world. They pointed to allegations of CIA links against Irving Brown, Director of the AALC, and Nana Mahomo,



*Alleged links between the AFL-CIO and the CIA means South African workers are reluctant to have anything to do with the American federation*

director of the new South African programme. When the AFL-CIO sent a high profile delegation to South Africa in September 1982, their reception was cool at best. The South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) and the Motor Assembly and

Component Workers Union (MACWUSA) refused to meet with the delegation, while other unionists met the Americans with great reservation.<sup>2</sup>

Concerns that American union aid could be divisive were substantiated during the first years of the AALC South African programme. Relations between the AALC and the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) were generally hostile, a pattern which continued after the launching of COSATU. Thus most of the American aid went to independent unions and those affiliated to the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) (now part of NACTU). CUSA also grew wary of the AALC's intentions, however, and in early 1985 announced to the AALC that it would "not tolerate any kind of trade union imperialism".<sup>3</sup>

Many of the unions which initially received AALC aid were extremely small, and some had broken off from already existing unions. Critics charged that if these unions had not received outside assistance, they would be forced to work with the larger and more established unions in their industries. For example, the African Miners and Allied Workers Union (AMAWU) was a small unaffiliated union formed in 1984 and assisted by the AALC. Although AMAWU was generally unsuccessful at organising workers, the AALC justified its aid to the union



*AFL-CIO had 'historic fondness for Gathsa Buthelezi'*

*Photo: Afrapix*

by saying: "NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) must recognise that it is not the only game in town .... there is room in the mining industry for alternatives to NUM and many non-union workers got a glimpse at differences in union style and leadership."<sup>4</sup>

### Fond of Buthelezi

Many South African union leaders were also wary of the AFL-CIO's historic fondness of Gathsa Buthelezi, who like the American federation was fervently anti-communist and anti-disinvestment (the AFL-CIO has since changed its stand on divestment, largely due to pressure from American union members and leaders who have been active in the US anti-apartheid movement).

During the 1982 visit, the American labour federation presented Buthelezi with the George Meany International Human Rights Award. Furthermore, the AFL-CIO



president Lane Kirkland described the KwaZulu Minister as "the single most potent force in resisting the onward rush of apartheid".<sup>5</sup> Thus when UWUSA was launched in May 1986, there was much speculation that the Inkatha-based union would receive American backing. Although UWUSA leaders did meet with AALC representatives, there is no evidence that UWUSA has actually received AALC funds, largely because of the pressures being put on the American labour centre from within South Africa and the United States.

## Pressures for change

While American and South African workers were pushing the AFL-CIO to toughen its stand on sanctions, the federation was also under fire from another source, the US government. In order to evaluate how AID money was being spent by the AALC, the agency hired Arnold M. Zack, a private consultant, in March of 1986. Zack's mission was to study the South African labour programme and make recommendations about future AALC activities. Although he praised many aspects of the centre's performance, he also recommended important changes: get closer to COSATU; don't fund splinter unions; and stay away from

Inkatha.

Zack's first report, which was issued in May 1986, evaluated many aspects of the AALC South African programme. However, it seemed particularly concerned with AALC's image in South Africa and the types of unions which were being selected for assistance. Zack felt that the refusal of trade unions to accept AALC assistance did not "reflect any anti-American or anti-AFL-CIO antipathy". Instead, it stemmed from the bad publicity given to the AALC when it first came to South Africa.<sup>6</sup>



*Advised to 'get closer to COSATU'*

### Get closer to COSATU

He pointed out that many unions preferred identification with the ICFTU, the International Trade Secretariats (ITS), which are closely associated with the ICFTU, or even the AFL-CIO rather than the AALC. He therefore recommended that aid money be funnelled through these or other channels, rather than coming directly from the centre. "Continuation of the AALC presence,"

he said, "may serve as a lightning rod for political attacks against the US and the AFL-CIO."<sup>7</sup> Thus money could be given through other parties, including individual American unions, while the AALC continued to take the political heat.

This strategy seemed particularly aimed at COSATU and its affiliates. Zack stated that from his discussions with COSATU officials, "it appears that there is a desire to expand relations with AFL-CIO affiliates in union to union programmes with and through the ITSs". He recommended that it would "be desirable to stimulate greater contacts with COSATU unions, since the federation promises to be the largest and most effective in South Africa for at least the near future." However, he warned that it may be premature for the AALC to go out of its way to "establish new contacts with COSATU or its member unions until conditions stabilise within COSATU."<sup>8</sup>

### Don't fund splinter unions and UWUSA

In order to foster this new relationship with COSATU, Zack made two other important recommendations, namely that the AALC should avoid "encouraging or supporting any splinter groups that have left the COSATU unions". It should also avoid establishing ties with the proposed Inkatha union UWUSA, because it would be linked to the politi-



cal future of Buthelezi, and its strength would be limited to the Natal region. Evidence of a close relationship with UWUSA would reduce the prospects of building stronger links with COSATU unions.<sup>9</sup>

Since COSATU appeared to be "here to stay", Zack argued, the AALC's influence on the trade unions scene would be better served in the long term by trying to work with the "stronger and more survivable unions of the COSATU federation".<sup>10</sup>

### Promote 'non-political' business unionism

It is important to note that Zack's recommendations signalled a new strategy for the AALC, but the fundamental goals remained the same. He predicted that as the new federation became more established, and pursued its goal of one union per industry, "the smaller, more political and more vocal community trade unions", would merge into the larger industrial unions. Power in COSATU would then "shift to the industrial unions". The AALC, he urged, should thus be careful to avoid taking sides in this struggle.<sup>11</sup>

Other comments made in the report confirm the AALC/AID goal of promoting non-political unionism. For example, Zack applauded the AALC's orientation toward unions with "a commitment to business trade unionism". He suggested that a training programme in labour law for

black attorneys would "encourage working within the law" and foster "democratic unions geared to challenging but living within the law."<sup>12</sup>

Zack, who interviewed more white than black people on his visit to South Africa, was evidently not moved by the fact that both major trade union federations in South Africa fundamentally oppose the country's racist laws.

### AALC's grant is cut

Shortly after Zack made his report, AID requested that the AALC resubmit its grant proposal for that year. It lowered the proposed amount from over \$1,9 million to \$1,5 million. An AID internal memorandum stated that, in response to the Zack evaluation, discussions were held between AID, the US state, the US Embassy in Pretoria and the AALC to "arrive at some consensus on the programme".<sup>13</sup> AID believed that "the AALC has steered as steady a course as possible in the support of the more moderate South African trade unions."

However, it had decided not to grant the full amount requested for two major reasons: 1) it doubted "their ability to substantially expand the programme at this time in South Africa", and 2) it saw "a lack of adequate planning for both the AALC training and union-to-union components of the project."<sup>14</sup>

The memo also complained that its "Africa Bureau has had consistent problems with the AALC on

both planning and reporting of their AID-funded activities". Furthermore, it stated, "the Bureau feels the AALC has not been doing its homework."

### AALC defends itself

Six months later, the AALC submitted a report to AID defending its programme. On the first page of the report, the AALC revealed its opinion of COSATU:

"COSATU was formed on a platform of militancy and rhetoric against the West. Immediate demand for disinvestment and sanctions, meetings with the outlawed African National Congress (ANC) and its WFTU-affiliated labour wing, rejection of assistance from the ICFTU and the AFL-CIO, and an open challenge to the South African government appear to constitute the main reasons for COSATU's existence."<sup>15</sup>

The report failed to mention that COSATU's 33 unions had won more recognition agreements than any other group of unions, and that COSATU's membership of over 650 000 far outnumbered the 250 000 combined membership of CUSA and its ally, the Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (AZACTU).

Although the AALC had repeatedly claimed that it opposed mixing politics and trade unionism, it was willing to make exceptions when the politics were to its liking. "A tribally-based labour federation," the report



claimed, "would seem to work for labour unity and industrial peace and have a *good change for survival*." Pointing to the "reknowned (sic) leader Chief Gatsha Buthelezi", it said:

"Extending the arms of Inkatha to include labour would seem to be a viable option. Buthelezi's interest in unions is well documented as are his efforts to attract business enterprises to Kwazulu to offset chronic unemployment."<sup>16</sup>

The report acknowledged, however, that "unionisation and the desire to increase employment opportunities are not totally compatible" and suggested that UWUSA would not have a strong shop floor base. The AALC also justified the assistance it gave to many independent unions in competition with larger COSATU affiliates.

### Further pressure on AALC

A few months later, in May 1987, Arnold Zack submitted another report to AID, this time outlining a strategy for American labour programmes in South Africa. As in his earlier report, Zack recognised the strength of COSATU, but he also emphasised the ideological divisions within the federation.

His interpreted the likelihood of the larger industrial unions becoming dominant within COSATU as meaning that the federation would be primarily composed of skilled trade unionists who

would be more sympathetic to building "a mixed South African economy in a social democracy". They would recognise that the "retention of industry in the country would keep jobs in the country as well. Those holding this view are not supporters of a strong state run economy..."<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the best way to help ensure a post-apartheid South Africa that was not hostile to US influence and investments would be to work with COSATU and encourage what he regarded as its 'pro-capitalist' tendencies.

The 1987 Zack report repeated many of the points he had made in 1986, about the AALC's support for marginal unions, and UWUSA's role as a 'spoiler'.<sup>18</sup>

The AALC soon came under public fire from another source: the US Congress. Members of the House Sub-Committee on Africa, which oversees the AID programmes in the region, had been concerned about AALC policies in South Africa for several years. In 1986, the issue was raised by a group of House Democrats, including Reps. Howard Wolpe, Bill Grey and Stephen Solarz, who complained that the AALC was not working with COSATU and was funding "splinter unions".

In 1987, when these members of Congress saw the new AALC programme proposal, they were angry to find that the AALC did not plan to change its policies.

They held a number of meetings with the AALC, AID and the AFL-CIO, and finally the Congressmen pulled rank on all of them. For several days in August 1987, Congress held up the funds intended for AALC's South Africa programme. The AALC had to agree to make a greater effort to work with the COSATU unions, and to support more direct union-to-union programmes.

## A change of strategy

The combined pressure on these various forces had indeed prompted the AFL-CIO to modify its policies. As stated above, the pressure from South African and American unionists eventually forced the federation to come out in support of comprehensive sanctions against South Africa. Likewise, pressure from South African unionists, the Agency for International Development, and democratic members of Congress have helped to reshape the AALC's programme in South Africa.

### Trying hard to work with COSATU

The most obvious change has been in the AALC's attitude toward COSATU. The 1988 AALC budget proposal went to great pains to show how hard it was trying to work with COSATU, which by that time had over 700 000





*American dollars to buy the loyalty of trade unions*

*Graphic: ILR*

members. The proposal reported that in 1987 there had been two meetings between representatives of the AFL-CIO and COSATU. The AFL-CIO's testimony to Congress regarding sanctions had helped to ease the tensions between the two federations. It also pointed out that in 1987, COSATU was invited to a number of AFL-CIO/AALC sponsored events, but that in most instances, "COSATU did not attend, citing passport difficulties." The report was hopeful, however, that "these efforts will lead to a better relationship based on more frequent communications and contact."<sup>19</sup>

The AALC also modified its policy toward independent unions. The 1988 proposal stated, "The two most important criteria (for AALC funding) are the

union's representation within the industry and the union's movement within or towards the black federations and their affiliates."<sup>20</sup> This dramatic change in criteria was reflected in the industry by industry breakdown of proposed AALC programmes. It repeatedly announced plans to work with COSATU and NACTU affiliates in conjunction with American based AFL-CIO affiliated unions in that industry. Likewise these union-to-union contacts were to be encouraged with some subsidy from the AALC.<sup>21</sup>

Also in accordance with the Zack reports, the AALC appears to have distanced itself from Buthelezi and UWUSA. There is no evidence that the AALC has given any financial support to UWUSA, which the 1988 proposal referred to as "one of the major stumbling

blocks within the trade union movement today."<sup>22</sup> When recently asked about the centre's relationship with the Inkatha union, Michael Lescault, AALC Programme Officer for Southern Africa, stated that the AALC had never supported UWUSA because they were opposed to using strikes as a weapon. This was in opposition to the AFL-CIO's own history.<sup>23</sup>

### **Implications for South African trade unions**

What do these recent changes in AALC programmes mean and what implications do they have for unionists within both South Africa and the United States? Does this change in AALC programme signify a change in overall objectives in the region, or merely a change in strategy? Is this new policy of working with COSATU unions better or worse for the long term interests of that federation? How should South African workers respond to what on the surface appears to be an improvement in AFL-CIO policies? How should American unions, particularly AFL-CIO affiliates, respond to the new initiative in union-to-union contacts?

On the one hand, the shift to union-to-union programmes offers great potential for more fruitful forms of solidarity between American and South African workers. Many American unionists are more progressive than the leadership of the AFL-CIO, and are sin-



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cere in their desire to assist their South African counterparts. As well as financial resources, they can share expertise on important issues such as health and safety in the workplace. They can also demonstrate their solidarity with South African workers through their support of the anti-apartheid movement in the United States.

On the other hand, however, it is important to point out that the AALC's shift in policy is not based on any new-found love of COSATU or its political tendencies. Rather, it is a move made to ensure continued funding of

its programmes from the Congress, through AID. For its part, AID still has the same objectives in mind. They want to ensure that the changes which take place in South Africa are more reformist than revolutionary. In addition, when black people eventually come to power in South Africa, they want them to be more friendly towards US economic, political and military interests in the region.

To this end, AID and the US State Department clearly feel that it is important to keep COSATU from becoming a strong force for

revolutionary change. The move to influence COSATU from the inside, rather than from a distance, is a more subtle strategy than funding its rivals, and potentially more harmful.

South African union leaders are certainly aware of these dangers and continue to be wary of the AALC, though many have begun engaging in union-to-union programmes. It is likely they will continue to grapple with the potential risks and benefits of American union aid for some time to come. ☆

## References

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5. *AALC Reporter*, vol 17 no 6, November-December 1982, p.4.
6. "Evaluation of the African American Labour Centre Project in the Republic of South Africa", conducted by Arnold M. Zack, May 12, 1986, p 11.
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid* p 11, p 9.
9. *Ibid* p 9.
10. *Ibid* p 12.
11. *Ibid* p 14.
12. *Ibid* p 12, p 17.
13. "Action Memorandum for the Assistance for Africa", from Laurence Hausman, AFR/PD, in regard to Authorisation for Amendment to the African-American Labour Centre (AALC) Grant for Support to Black South African Trade Unions (690-0223), AID, PDBBD907, p 1.
14. *Ibid* p 3.
15. "Report: South African Programme, 1986", AALC, March 1, 1987, p 1. Emphasis mine.
16. *Ibid* p 2.
17. "Development Assistance for the South African Labour Sector in South Africa: A Strategy", Prepared for US-AID by Arnold M. Zack, May 10, 1987.
18. *Ibid* p 18, p 10.
19. "Programme of Action for Black Trade Unions in South Africa: 1988 Proposal", AALC, p 26.
20. *Ibid* p 58
21. For a Description of some of these union-to-union contacts see *AALC Reporter*, vol 23 no 4 1988, p 1.
22. 1988 Proposal, p 3.
23. Interview with Michael T. Lescault, Programme Officer, AALC, 1/3/89.