

## **The 1979 TUCSA Conference: moving in for the kill**

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At its 1979 conference, TUCSA took a decision to give its affiliates a free rein in the organising of African workers into parallel unions consequent on the government's extension to them of trade union rights. The granting of these rights arose out of the recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission which stated that union rights should be extended to all workers. TUCSA welcomes the recommendations in the Wiehahn report, stating that they were in keeping with the principles of free association followed internationally. It held that these were principles in which TUCSA had always and continued to believe and expressed opposition to the fact that mixed trade unions would not be allowed. Its decision at the conference to organise African workers could then be seen as the logical outcome of its stated belief that all workers should be able to enjoy the protection of a trade union which would lead to the achievement of equality of opportunity, etc.

It would, however, be naive to take TUCSA's statements at face value. While superficially its policy towards African trade unions is, in terms of moral criteria of equality and non-racialism, commendable, in reality it represents the economic and political interests of the skilled and privileged section of the working class to preserve the status quo. In this regard, an examination of TUCSA's performance over time, in terms of the unionisation of African workers and its relationships with other workers is particularly instructive. It will be shown that it is not so much freedom of association in which TUCSA is interested, but rather compliance with state policy, protection of the interests of white workers and deference to management. Its present decision to unionise African workers does not represent a deviation from this policy for, on examination, it becomes evident that its main motivation here is the control of the African working class' entry into, and its existence within, the registered trade union movement. The reason TUCSA believes this control is necessary becomes clear if we examine statements made at the 1979 conference and elsewhere by its representatives over the last year.

TUCSA's main concern is to prevent the emergence within the registered trade union movement of a more militant trade unionism and one which will

challenge, rightly so, the privileged position of white workers in the labour structure. Arthur Grobbelaar, general secretary of TUCSA, clarified his feelings on this in an address to the NDMF's 18th Business Outlook conference in October 1979:

'Up until now collective bargaining has mainly involved the early targets, that is matters such as wages and hours, conditions of service, payments for overtime, holidays, bonuses and the like. A great number of our more privileged workers have, through this process, achieved a position of relative comfort - a position which, while it may need to be maintained by way of periodic adjustments, has nevertheless been attained. But now with this tremendous opening up of true bargaining rights for our underprivileged workers, I anticipate that we will see a considerable change in bargaining patterns. These underprivileged workers are not in a position to appreciate the status quo. They will be bargaining not just for improved wages and conditions, but for a whole new basis for their position in the labour market: they will be bargaining for status. At the same time, the unions whose members have attained a position of relative well-being will be concerned with the maintenance of the status quo. They are likely to view with some trepidation the rising demand on the part of the underprivileged for improved training opportunities and status especially since these demands will now be made from a more secure position. The established unions are therefore likely to devote more attention to bargaining for job security and for such facilities as vocational and re-training programmes than they have done in the past.

TUCSA is also afraid that an emerging militancy, if left unchecked, could lead to the involvement of the union movement in political activities even though this is outlawed by the state. The political overthrow of existing society would also mean the loss of privileges and protection of a certain section of the working class. Mr. Grobbelaar points out that African and coloured political groups have already decided upon the tactics and strategy of coupling their political aspirations with their economic and trade union aspirations. His view on the developments of a militant unionism is summed up in a quote from an address given to the Merca Bank Foundation in October 1979:

'I think it is true to say that South Africa has not really witnessed significant militant trade union activities since the 1922 strike. But this may now change, and very rapidly, since our black unions can now or-

ganise into fully registered trade unions - with the muscle of the law on their side, and with a secure base for their bargaining power. It may well be that some of these unions, having been excluded from a legally based bargaining position for so long, will be militant - at the very least their approach will tend to differ materially from that of the existing unions'.

The intense interest which TUCSA displayed at its conference in organising African workers is directly related to its desire to prevent the emergence of this militancy which it identifies as inherent in the independent African union movement. A resolution, unanimously adopted urged TUCSA affiliates to assist in the organisation of African workers, which according to one speaker had proceeded at too 'pedestrian' a pace in the past. The mover of the resolution, a Mr. Joseph, said that following the granting of trade union rights to African workers there would probably be a marked increase in the organising activity amongst them and that TUCSA should be in the forefront of this activity. TUCSA's fear of the independent union movement is directly related to the growing power of the African trade unions.

The years since 1973 have seen the development of a movement which far outstrips TUCSA in membership, if one compares them on the basis of African workers alone. This membership in the independent unions has in most cases been built up through concerted action on the shop floor, which means that these unions are working closely with the grass roots rather than dictating from above. It is this contact with the grass roots and the resulting strength of these independent unions which TUCSA fears. Its main *bêtes noires* in the independent movement are the FOSATU unions, the General Workers' Union, the African Food and Canning Workers' Union and its 'mixed' counterpart, while its relations with the unions in the Consultative Committee are none too friendly. TUCSA, in an attempt to curtail the growth of these unions, has over time, embarked on a strategy to discredit them in the eyes of the government, the public and, of course, management.

That the TUCSA unions have embarked on a programme of competing with the independent unions was demonstrated at the conference by the rejection that a motion proposing that TUCSA unions refrain from organising in those industries in which independent African unions already existed. (This was replaced by the above-mentioned resolution urging TUCSA unions to organise African workers). The conference was informed that there already was competitive recruiting of African members in the engineering, motor and clothing industries. A representative of the Engineering Industries Workers' Union, Archie Poole, said that he had formed a new union in op-

position to the FOSATU union in the industry. This move was expressed as being in the interests of African workers who were seen as being 'misled' by the FOSATU union.

A further expression of the conflict is reflected in the fact that a resolution calling for the 'full moral and financial support' for strikers sacked by Fattis and Monis and the Eveready factories, was turned down. The arguments opposing the resolution were: that TUCSA opposed boycotts (at the time, a boycott of both companies products was in operation); that the unions were not affiliated to TUCSA (this unfortunate attitude says nothing for TUCSA's claim that it has the interests of all workers at heart); and that the Eveready strike was financed with 75 000 Swiss francs from the International Metal Workers' Federation.

Behind these objections lies the central motivation which is TUCSA's dislike for the more radical unions which were involved in organising the workers in the two above-mentioned factories. Thus, the majority of TUCSA unions wished, as far as possible, to disassociate themselves from these unions, and hence from the struggle to obtain redress for the workers' grievances, despite constant statements that TUCSA is the champion of workers' rights. On the other hand, it is quite prepared to go courting with the right wing and a resolution was accepted at the conference for new efforts by TUCSA to reach consensus on further labour reforms with the Confederation of Labour and the Confederation of Metal and Building Unions.

TUCSA's seriousness of purpose in winning the organising race was clearly demonstrated at the conference. A blueprint containing proposals for the establishment of an organising committee to assist TUCSA affiliates in their organising efforts was presented. The committee will be able to recommend organising projects to the national executive, assist affiliates on request with advice on organising projects, and consider applications from TUCSA and non-TUCSA unions for financial assistance for organising workers. Most significantly, it suggested that TUCSA move to a policy of initiating rather than reacting to events: significant because it throws up TUCSA's history in the field of organising African workers. An examination of this history reveals the extent to which TUCSA has in the past been prepared to bow to pressures from the state, management and prejudiced white workers. That TUCSA is now supporting trade unionism for Africans, is linked to the fact that the dispensation has been credited by the state and there is, therefore, very little danger of TUCSA finding itself in confrontation with the state. Such a situation has, in the past, led to TUCSA withdrawing its 'support' for African unions.

A brief look at TUCSA's history reveals the extent to which this is true. In 1954, when TUCSA was formed, it excluded African trade unions from membership, because opposition to this move was voiced by certain white trade unions. After the formation of SACTU, a rival body bent on organising African workers in 1955, TUCSA proceeded to establish a liaison committee to assist African unions, but very little was achieved as a result of this. In 1959, TUCSA, in conjunction with the ICFTU, founded the Federation of African Trade Unions of South Africa (FOFATUSA) in opposition to SACTU. In 1962, TUCSA decided to allow African unions to affiliate and eventually most of the FOFATUSA unions joined. In 1969, once SACTU's strength had been destroyed, TUCSA decided to exclude African unions and these were forced to disaffiliate. This, in part, was due to the fact that white trade unions, unhappy with the membership of African unions, were beginning to leave TUCSA, which then preferred to scupper its African workers rather than lose its white support. It was also due to the fact that at the time the government was lukewarm to TUCSA allowing African affiliates. Instead of standing by its 'principles' TUCSA fell into line with the government's wishes. After the 1973 strikes, TUCSA again started to organise African workers into parallel unions, and by 1977 there were eleven such unions. In 1974, apparently in response to the growth of the independent African unions, TUCSA decided that Africans could once again re-enter its ranks.

One of the methods used by the TUCSA unions in the competitive struggle to recruit African members is the attempt to gain advantage over the independent unions by presenting themselves to management as the responsible unions while simultaneously attempting to discredit the independent unions. A FOSATU memorandum (see in this edition) has claimed that companies were granting TUCSA unions preferential facilities for recruiting workers, that they were telling workers through their personnel officers to join the parallel TUCSA unions and that these unions were prepared to accept management strategies like liaison committees. In response, Mr. Malherbe, the then vice-president of TUCSA, made a scathing attack on the FOSATU unions. He questioned the independence of these unions by alleging that they received money from abroad. He said that employers preferred the parallel unions because they were free from foreign influence, because they knew the union leaders from personal experience and repute and because they had good relations of co-operation, as opposed to the independent unions which had been involved in confrontation. Parallel unions, he held, would not proliferate, but would merge with their white or mixed counterparts to work together with employers. He also said that it was the prerogative of employers to choose which union to allow into the factory. Whereas the independent unions attempt to maintain close links with the workers on

the factory floor, TUCSA unions establish contact with management in order to recruit workers.

Mr. Grobbelaar obviously had TUCSA in mind when in the speech at the Business Outlook Conference, he said that trade unions could play a major role in avoiding polarisation through conveying to all sectors of the workforce, the indivisibility of workers through 'education, exhortation and example'. He continued later:

'It is my fervent hope that the **responsible** role I have spelt out for the enlightened trade unions will also become the concepts and attitudes of management and that they will (in their own enlightened self interest) seek practically and mutually beneficial partnerships with organised labour'.

### **Conclusion**

TUCSA has accepted the registration process set up by the government even though it has been making pleas to the state to lift the prohibition on multi-racial trade unions. In calling for this, however, TUCSA is not so much concerned with the principle of freedom of association *per se*, but, as we have demonstrated, with placing itself in a position whereby in allowing African workers into its organisation, it is in a strong position to control these workers, to determine the form of trade unionism which may evolve and thus inhibit the development of a threatening conflict of interests. In the past, TUCSA followed a policy of organising African workers into parallel unions which were financially and organisationally dependent on the parent union and thus lacked the power to assert themselves in a situation where a conflict of interests emerged. The objective behind **both** the parallel unions and mixed unions is one of control, the difference lying only in the methods used to achieve it.

In the long term, African workers must surely be put off by unions which are not only more management than worker oriented, but which also subordinate their demands to those of the privileged workers. In the short term, the success these unions have in negotiating economic benefits may entice some workers into their ranks. However, if workers who join TUCSA unions now become disillusioned later, it could well lead to the development of the industrial unrest which TUCSA says it wishes to avoid.