

Letter From TUCSA

Comment - 'The Re-alignment of the Registered Trade Unions'
SALB Vol. 5, No. 3 - October 1979

In the interests of accuracy it must be pointed out that the second President of the Trade Union Council of South Africa was Thomas Charles Rutherford, and not John Rutherford, as stated in your article. It is further pointed out that the quotation attributed to Rutherford comes from a speech made by him, and not a letter. The remark made was contained in his opening address, delivered to the Conference of the South African Boilermaker's Society, on November the 7th, 1955.

Rutherford's speech was indeed quoted by Mr. M. Steyn in Parliament, but the year was 1956, during the debate on the draft Industrial Conciliation Bill.

As it is a well known fact that quotations out of context can be made to prove almost anything, it is therefore important to consider the sentence in Rutherford's speech following immediately after the one quoted: **'We did not object to the employment of Natives in industry, but we desired the creation of effective machinery to protect the workers from the exploitation of Native labour for cheap labour purposes'**.

This speech made by Rutherford outlined the steps which had been taken, first by the Unity Committee and the subsequent Conferences, and then by TUCSA to combat the National Party's proposals, contained in the draft Industrial Conciliation Bill, to racially segregate the trade union movement, and introduce job reservation, both of which proposals were bitterly opposed by the unions which comprised TUCSA. It should also be noted that it was the then Government's intention to racially segregate the labour movement which was the catalyst leading to the formation of TUCSA.

To use this quotation to attempt to prove TUCSA's concern as being solely that of protecting White workers' interests, is a gross distortion. TUCSA at that early stage was already a multi-racial organisation, the overwhelming majority of its affiliates being 'mixed' trade unions. (Indeed, as mentioned above, it was the government threat to the **mixed** trade unions which led to the creation of TUCSA). It is therefore difficult to understand how the stand which was taken by a multiracial organisation can be construed as being in the interests of Whites only. Incidentally, TUCSA is still the only completely

business to help in the organisation of Black workers in their industries, and have retained close links with such unions - which could not be registered, up until very recently. In the trade union tradition, this concept is best summed up as 'in unity lies strength'. Such organising activity is also, most certainly, a legitimate trade union activity. As committed trade unions, it must naturally be the objective of TUCSA's affiliates to help in the organising of as great a part of the workforce as is possible, thus building a united and strong labour movement.

It must also be pointed out that the subject of parallel unions was not a topic which received attention at the most recent TUCSA conference. It has received attention at several TUCSA conferences in the past. Over the past two years, in anticipation of the new labour dispensation, many TUCSA affiliates have given increasing attention to the organisation of Black workers. It must again be emphasised that this is activity undertaken by the TUCSA affiliates, as independent trade unions. TUCSA is a co-ordinating council and, as previously stated, may not interfere in the domestic affairs of its affiliates. TUCSA certainly has a policy in this regard, namely, to encourage and foster the establishment of *bona fide* trade unions and trade unionism, but TUCSA itself cannot, and does not, undertake organising campaigns.

TUCSA, therefore, is not conducting an 'organising drive' as is contended, but its affiliates are certainly working to make the labour movement in South Africa stronger. Even less is TUCSA conducting an 'offensive' against independent African trade unions. TUCSA would like to be presented with some factual information to justify this unwarranted and incorrect assumption. All organising is done by TUCSA affiliates, and not as part of any centralised campaign. It may be that TUCSA affiliated unions have on occasion entered areas in which the so-called 'independent' unions have an interest, but it is certain that often such 'independent' unions have been known to attempt to go into areas in which TUCSA affiliates have an interest, or where they are actually engaged in organising programmes.

Perhaps the hollowness of the case of the author of the comment is best demonstrated by the apparent necessity to deviate from accuracy, already referred to in an earlier paragraph. This is again accentuated by another complete deviation from the truth: Mr. Ronnie Webb has at no stage, either during the TUCSA conference or at any other time, made an overt - or even covert - attack upon the Food and Canning Workers' Union.

As a legitimate trade union co-ordinating body - representative of over

250 000 workers - TUCSA completely refutes the allegation in the article of 'collaboration with both the government and employers' in any strategies whatsoever. We do believe in trade unionism for all workers, and in the achievement of such organisation of the workers. We most certainly welcome the Government's decision to extend trade union rights to all, and employer recognition of these rights. Both are long overdue. Not only does TUCSA refute the allegation of **collaboration** (which is a value laden word favoured by propagandists of both the extreme left and right) it is also of the opinion that the word is inappropriate in **comment**, which implies that a degree of objectivity will be maintained. TUCSA, does of course recognise that **comment** and **opinion** can be a guise for propaganda for particular interest groups. TUCSA frankly does admit to seeking co-operation on a tri-partite basis with both Government and employers. This again, in our opinion, is a legitimate function of organised labour: how else, indeed, can labour make its voice heard in the corridors of power? TUCSA would submit that it is vitally important for organised labour to have such means to make **known** its position and aspirations, if the politics of **street negotiating** are eschewed.

Your commentator states that '**TUCSA has now become crucial for the working out of state labour policy**'. There is an implied sneer here, which TUCSA will ignore, but TUCSA does not find it strange that this should be so. A viable body of organised labour, in co-operation or otherwise, is always a critical factor in the development of national labour strategies.

Your commentator's contention that TUCSA has moved closer to the Confederation is almost too absurd for comment (although we have noted with interest a certain interest in the **rate for the job** concept amongst some of the Confederation's affiliates). Your commentator then states: '**their interests and mechanisms of protecting the White worker coincide**' - a manifestly ridiculous and demonstrably unsound statement, when it is considered that the White workers in TUCSA comprise only in the region of 30% of the affiliated membership of the Council. As evidence for these very tenuous conclusions, TUCSA's rejection of a resolution at the last Conference concerning the Mine Workers' Union is cited. In fact this resolution was not rejected, but referred to TUCSA's National Executive Committee, for further consideration. Conference took this decision because it was felt by the Conference participants that the resolution was badly drafted, and parts of it were erroneous. TUCSA's National Executive Committee will, however, decide during the course of the coming year, how best to process this resolution.

Finally, the commentator's conclusion is faulty as a prediction, since it is

based upon a false premise, namely, that TUCSA is attacking the **'Independent African trade union movement.'** TUCSA is not. If the legitimate organising activities of any of our affiliates are construed by anyone as attacks, we would opine that this is indicative of their rather tenuous position, both as trade unions - and in relation to reality. We would counsel that the best remedy of the **'Independent African trade union movement'** against such **'attacks'** and **'member poaching'** is the effective organisation and thorough consolidation of their trade unions into real positions of strength, and popularity amongst their membership - and not in the gymnastics of inaccurate and distorted attacks upon TUCSA, which are superficially researched and then written by anti-TUCSA apologists.

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A Reply

In response to the comment in **SALB** Vol. 5 No. 3, the general secretary of TUCSA disputes the argument put forward by the editors. The pivotal point of that argument was to compare TUCSA's stated position in respect of African workers with their **de facto** lack of activity in that regard for the last two and a half decades. The argument likewise attempted to understand the reasons which lie behind TUCSA's sudden commitment to organising African workers.

In the general secretary's letter to the editors, we are told about TUCSA's **'long and committed stand against job reservation, against the denial of trade union rights to Black workers and against the inferior and discriminatory labour relations system designed for Blacks'** However, when its activities with regard to this stated 'commitment' are criticised, TUCSA then turns to justify its policies in terms of the 'legitimate' principles of trade unionism. In line with this, we hear appeals for the rights 'to protect the economic standards of its membership' and 'to control the dismissal of its members'.

It is not, however, the **legitimacy** of TUCSA's actions which is being debated. Undoubtedly, TUCSA experiences few problems proving its legitimacy to both government and employers. Rather, it is the real reasons governing TUCSA's policies which should concern us.

Firstly, the general secretary attempts to convince us that TUCSA has, from the very outset, been committed to non-racial principles - that in fact, TUCSA was established **in order** to fight against the government's threat to 'mixed' trade unions. History demonstrates the weakness of this claim. The formation in 1954 of SATUC (later TUCSA) as a 'mixed' co-ordinating body, was largely an expedient move designed to protect its membership. The draft Industrial Conciliation Bill threatened to isolate organisationally a diminishing white working class. Unless those workers - coloureds and Indian - could be kept within the TUCSA fold, the co-ordinating body would be drastically weakened. The then TUCSA president, Rutherford, did in fact spell this out unequivocally. In a speech made in December 1955, he discussed TUCSA's strategy against the IC Bill in the following terms:

'I must point out that registered trade unions are prohibited by law from admitting natives to membership. Hence, the belief held in some quarters that our opposition to the Bill is because we wish to retain native workers within our ranks, is, of course, totally incorrect. It is true that the fact that they are not members of registered trade unions is responsible for the present wholesale exploitation of them to the detriment of the other workers, but that is not the issue in our struggle against the dangerous provisions in the IC Bill. The non-white workers we are concerned with are those who have been members of our organisation for more than half a century, and have worked beside us at the occupation for even longer than that'.

Secondly, the general secretary seeks to prove that TUCSA's policies *vis-à-vis* African workers are firmly based on accepted trade union principles, such as the need to build 'a united and strong labour movement'. However, as de Clercq argues in an article analysing the strategies which the craft and 'mixed' industrial unions adopted in order to protect their job control, the acceptance of African workers as union colleagues has a more expedient base to it. Rather, she argues, such acceptance has far more to do with the historical outcome of the processes of job fragmentation and deskilling than with the commitment to build up a genuinely 'united and strong labour movement' - let alone a non-racial one.

Thirdly, in spite of TUCSA's continuous protestations to the contrary, it has at no stage in its history actually mobilised workers in support of these principles. There is no clearer index of TUCSA's 'commitment to workers interests' than its response to actual worker struggles. As Cooper and Ensor show in this edition of SALB, TUCSA has consistently refused to support workers engaged in such struggles. The most condemning indictment against TUCSA is that after 25 years of existence, only 1% of African workers

belong to trade unions, and the majority of these unions were formed outside its auspices.

Finally, TUCSA's attempts to gain control over the statutory bodies which have been set up to 'represent' the African working class, must be understood as an attempt to stem the advance of potentially militant African trade unions which would inevitably threaten the *status quo* within the registered trade union movement. According to the general secretary himself, (see page of this bulletin) 'underprivileged' workers 'are not in a position to appreciate the *status quo*'. For this reason TUCSA hopes to control the field of trade unionism, by effectively monopolising statutory channels of negotiation, thus neutralising the democratic black unions as a force with which to contend.

It is in the light of the aforementioned points that one should view both TUCSA's activities and - what follows from the real nature of these activities - its need to justify the role it has adopted in South African trade unionism.

Managing Editor
SALB

Letter to SALB

With regard to the WPGWU memorandum, published in Vol. 5 No. 4 a number of important points must be made. Firstly, serious doubts must be cast on the advisability of publishing such articles in the South African Labour Bulletin. There has been an air of expectancy following this publication, as it is felt in many circles that the points made in the memorandum should not go unanswered. The fact that the Bulletin has carried no serious answers to the points made by WPGWU has naturally given rise to much misguided criticism of other labour organisations which are perceived as being obliged to respond publically.

To start with there is, of course, a certain academic and intellectual self centredness in equating debate about registration with articles in periodicals. It suggests that a debate within the labour organisations themselves is somehow not debate because it has not received the seal of approval from the intellectual and academic community. Now there is no doubt that this community is important and attempts by labour organisations to exclude it from all debate, probably do indicate a paucity of debate and self criticism.

However, there is a much more important point regarding debate and the role of intellectual comment and that is that the exact way it is conducted is

governed by the historical circumstances in which it is conducted. To comment in this fully is not possible in a letter, however, certain general points should be made in order for the Bulletin to locate itself more adequately.

When labour movements are weak and confronted by powerful state and managerial forces, then public debate as to the actions of the organisations concerned is misguided. This is particularly true when the labour movement is attempting serious worker organisation and as such in a minority political position.

In these circumstances, the forum chosen for debate does have implications. Attempts to conduct the debate at the most public level possible through journals such as yours, the press, universities and international trade union conferences, reflects a pre-occupation the general attack on the state. That registration is important for the labour movement is indisputable. However, to make the legislation central, again reflects a pre-occupation with the state and the general political attack on the state. The various tendencies correctly identified by critics of registration such as growing bureaucratisation, excessive legalism and a distancing from the organisation of workers, are exacerbated by registration, but most certainly, registration is not the sole cause of such tendencies.

To guard against such tendencies requires debate and self criticism within the labour movements and such debate should have been held long before the advent of the registration choice. Registration as such reflects the particular power of the South African state to impose direct control on trade unions that would be unacceptable to the more powerful union movements elsewhere. The specific interests of business and the existence of a weak, divided and sectional labour movement that has accepted registration and the Industrial Conciliation Act for more than 50 years strengthens state power by allowing control to be dressed up as reform.

Thus realignment of forces against labour into a less vulnerable block was quite clearly in the making some years ago. As a result, the general interest in labour and attempts here and internationally to influence the growing labour organisations developed.

To their credit, the divided and fragmented independent unions responded to those looming threats by trying to forge a nationally based federation and more important, to forge a sense of common purpose with regard to policy. That the attempt was only partially successful is well known. However, for the informal observer, the exercise has provided those involved in

the formation of FOSATU and in the less urgent, but nonetheless important reassessments with the Consultative Committee.

So debate, there has been, and for those in FOSATU it has had 3 years to take place. Even in this case, where structurally common policy is actively sought, common purpose has been, and will be a slow process. This must perforce be the case.

There is no doubt that we would see this article in this context since it does emanate from a group that has until recently, chosen to remain very isolated. It is now belatedly and somewhat frantically attempting to generate debate and have by chance of circumstance, chosen very public forums for that debate.

I feel that in publishing this article, the Bulletin has to be aware, as must its readers, of the points made here. Particularly problematic are the misinterpretations of certain actions taken by other unions. This stems both from a general position that reflects a concern to take strong stands against the state, but a more accommodationist stand toward capital.

It would be naive to feel that such differences should be debated in the pages of the Bulletin, at one minute past midnight.

Halton Cheadle