

PROBLEMS OF TRADE UNIONISM IN SOUTH AFRICA.

Recently a prominent English Trade Union official visited this country. After a lengthy and apparently exhaustive investigation of the Trade Union Movement here, he came to the conclusion that there was no such thing in South Africa as a "real" trade union movement!

This devastating comment may cause offence to some South Africans, who have been members of and have spent many years in the work of the Trade Unions. But an objective comparison of the character of the South African Trade Union Movement with the basic precepts and motives of Trade Unionism must convince one of the correctness of the conclusions of our foreign visitor.

What are the basic motives, purposes and principles of Trade Unionism?

The Trade Union Movement is the organisation of the working class which in the circumstances of the existing social order serves as the means of furthering and protecting the interests of the workers. In as much as the social order of things conflicts with the interests of the workers, the purpose of the Trade Union Movement is to change this order of things so that it may be in conformity with the historic interests of the class it represents. Two vital principles follow from this. Firstly, it is imperative that the Trade Union Movement be consistent in its defence of workers' rights and interests. It must never cease to play the role of "advocate of the workers", and it must boldly and fearlessly proclaim the paramount importance of those who work and who produce the wealth of society. Secondly, in endeavouring to achieve its purpose the Movement must develop and maintain the maximum unity of all workers.

In South Africa these basic principles, essential to a successful Trade Union Movement, are lacking. This criticism applies to all sections of the Movement, both European and non-European.

The main and most obvious failing of the Trade Unions in South Africa is the disunity of the workers. This is reflected not only in the almost complete exclusion of the African workers from the major established trade unions, but in such equally tragic phenomena as "parallel" branches for

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coloured or Indian workers. With some rare exceptions there is no point of contact between European and non-European workers. Even the more "liberal" white workers' leaders and organisations will not go beyond advocating that the wages and conditions of non-European workers must be "uplifted". Very rare, indeed, is the case where European and non-European workers act and work together in the joint defence of their common rights and interests. The effect of this disunity on the living and working conditions of the people of South Africa is too obvious to need mentioning. Thus the South African Trade Union scene shows an almost complete negation of the basic principle of workers' unity.

It might be argued that the failure to secure workers unity in the Trade Unions is the result of imperialist conditions, the consequence of deliberate and persistent racialist propaganda by the ruling class and the influence of apartheid policies of the Government. But that is at best only a lame excuse. The real cause of the disunity is the lack of a clear-sighted policy designed to protect the interests of all workers first and foremost. This lack of a clear policy leads white trade union leaders even to ignore and to sacrifice the basic interests of their own white members.

A clear example of this is the manner in which European Trade Union leaders fence themselves off from the realities of the worker's life under the slogan of "no politics". Step by step this slogan has led them to sacrifice basic rights and liberties of their members. In fact, many of them have now reached the stage where any criticism of the Government is regarded as "politics" and in consequence they now limp along in the wake of the political parties. It is the political parties of the ruling class who now dictate the policies of many of the European trade unions. It is not a very far cry from this to the position where the trade unions become an adjunct of the State. The slogan of "no politics" means the refusal of independence to the Trade Union Movement.

South African trade union leaders have gone a long way in sacrificing the independence of the Movement. This was revealed in the support given by a great many trade union leaders to the incentive bonus ideas of Labour Minister Schoeman. An outstanding and the most disgusting example

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was the readiness with which some trade union leaders concurred at the proposal to establish some form of "Craftsmen's Committee" for the purpose of screening alleged communists under the Suppression of Communism Act. A large group of trade unions took part in discussions for the purpose of implementing the recommendations of the Nationalist Industrial Legislation Commission, a body whose undisguised object was to carry into effect the anti-trade union labour programme of the Nationalist Party. Of equal significance is the readiness with which trade union leaders are inclined to support the Korea war adventure and the preparations for another world war. All these things are dangerous pointers to the path taken by South African Trade Union leaders, a path which must lead the Movement to destructions if the members of the trade unions are not awakened to the fatal consequences of these policies.

The above criticisms apply mainly to the so-called European Trade Unions. In their case, these weaknesses arise from the white workers' temporary privilege of sharing in the exploitation of the non-European workers and their lack of clear vision of their own fundamental and ultimate interests.

But the African or non-European Trade Unions also display failings in elementary policies. This does not refer to the "racketeering" of some African trade union leaders, a phenomenon caused by ignorance of the workers, lack of experience in administrative work and the abject poverty and insecurity of African trade union leaders. Of far greater significance is the dangerous trend of isolation of the African trade unions from the national liberation movement, the emphasis on the futile slogan of "no politics" and the almost exclusive concentration on so-called economic issues. Many African trade unionists have as yet not realised that there can be no economic advance for their members and no protection for the standards achieved through the present very limited methods of negotiation without political and civil rights. The main weakness of the African trade unions, indeed, is the immense lack of freedom and rights of their members and of their organisations.

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What then -- to quote the title of a book of no mean tonical significance for South Africa -- is to be done?

In the first place it becomes necessary to raise fearlessly and without hesitation the vital issues facing the workers in South Africa today. It is necessary -- even in the face of opposition, insults and abuse -- to start discussions at trade union conferences, general meetings, executive meetings on all aspects of the workers' struggle. It is necessary to put forward in these discussions, clearly and unequivocally, the view that no section of workers can expect any progress unless all workers enjoy the fullest democratic rights. It is necessary to liberate the trade union movement from subservience to Government and employers' policies. It is necessary to bring the Trade Union Movement actively into the struggle of the people for full democracy.

All constitutional avenues open in the trade unions must be utilised for this purpose. Study Classes should be organised, wherever possible. Articles in trade union journals, analyses of the day to day issues from the angle of the real workers' interests, should be written. The columns of the press, even the reactionary dailies, should be utilised through letters to the Editor, press statements, interviews.

A free, independent and vigorous Trade Union Movement, fighting uncompromisingly for the workers' interests, will be an invaluable weapon in the struggle for liberation.