

Focus on topics such as language and labour, language and education, language and theology, literature and society, English and people's education, the semantics of liberation and apartheid, and applied linguistics and South African needs, locates the interests of the expert and the intellectual after those of the community — the workers, the parents, the students, the citizens, the people.

GABORONE CONFERENCE

The second notable gathering which has been influential in the conception of the Academy's conference, is the 'Culture and Resistance' conference in Gaborone in 1982. At this conference, the political significance of all cultural activities was stressed. The notion of artists, poets, musicians and teachers as 'cultural workers' was firmly endorsed there. The emphasis which the organisers of the Academy's conference have derived from this is that the political implications — as defined by the entire nexus of developments in our present society — of all cultural manifestations need overt attention. Language is obviously central to all social and communal activity and its political significance, especially at this stage of South Africa's history, cannot be over-estimated. Far from imposing a limited perspective on either language or politics by that assertion, both are extended and enhanced by it. The particular nature of the relation between language and politics in each instance needs most precise attention and analysis, but to ignore the role of either at any moment of consideration is to omit an essential dimension of the central concerns of people.

The Gaborone conference emphasised the need for art to be non-elitist. What this implies and what it can really mean to writers, scholars, educators, students and critics requires persistent scrutiny and consideration. Readership, education, the conditions for writers to work under, as well as the dissemination of plays, poetry, novels and critical articles are significant factors in the linguistic state of a society. This is not to reduce the central linguistic concerns to mere sociological measurement or description: the forces

which impinge upon a society's languages must be acknowledged and understood.

ENGLISH

Although the Academy's conference will be concerned with English, it cannot do so as if English is the only significant language in South Africa. That would be to place the conference back in 1974. T.S. Eliot's observation that poetry should not stray too far from the ordinary language of people is clearly illustrated by the most vital poetry written in South Africa in recent times. Furthermore, the real language of people — instead of standardised, internationalised, corporate, mass-media homogenized language which passes for the verbal expressions of human beings — is what an assessment of a language in South Africa needs to attend to. How language is expressed on factory floors, in shops, at resettlement camps, within urban and rural slums, in city centres, at political rallies, on buses and trains, and on school playgrounds ought to be audible to the ear that the conference turns to the speech of the entire South African community.

There are many other concerns which such a conference must acknowledge, such as vested interests, political and organizational sensitivities, as well as the expectations of very diverse sectors of society. Interest groups and individuals with strong convictions and persuasions should ensure that their views are heard, not merely discussed by others. Then the conference will have truly served the interests of South African society. □

NOTES:

(1) de Villiers A. (ed). 1976. *English-speaking South Africa Today*. Oxford University Press (Cape Town), page 377

(2) *The Weekly Mail*, Vol. 2, No. 15, 18-24 April, 1986.

N.B. The views expressed here are not necessarily the views of the English Academy of Southern Africa, but those of the writer of this article, the Conference organizer.

By Gary Baines

REVIEW ARTICLE

D. Ncube, 'The influence of Apartheid and Capitalism on the Development of Black Trade Unions in South Africa' (Johannesburg, Skotaville Publishers, 1985) 176 pp., illus., bibl.

This is the first publication in a new series by Skotaville Publishers entitled "Izwi Labasebenzi" (We are the workers). The book is based on a M.Sc. (Manpower Studies) dissertation for the University of Manchester, Institute of Science and Technology. There can be no doubt that the development of black trade unions is an important topic and it is commendable that the writer has set himself the task of relating his study to the ongoing theoretical debate in South African social studies and historiography.

The writer sets out "to analyse the historical development and ideological disposition of Black trade unions with reference to the Unitary, the Pluralist and the Marxist frames of reference" (p.xiii). While he identifies these three theoretical frameworks at the outset, his utilisation of them as analytical tools throughout the text is arbitrary and uneven. He falls back on a description rather than an analysis of the factors which influenced the development of Black trade unionism. Although one or other perspective is often implicit in the text, they are not clearly delineated so that there is no progression from the abstract to the particular. The theoretical frameworks only receive substantial treatment in an epilogue which is appended to the main text and, accordingly, reads like a postscript.

MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

In his analysis of the 'Marxist perspective', Ncube broaches certain issues which are of crucial concern to the role of black trade unionism within the apartheid society. He argues that "for the Marxists, collective bargaining is a process through which trade unions tinker at the system to encourage adjustments and reform, and not to effect structural change by redistributing wealth and power" (p. 155). In short, trade unions are part of the problem and not the answer to the overthrow of apartheid because they do not seek the destruction of capitalism. Instead, they "focus attention on marginal material aggrandisement and, in the process, precipitate the affluence and therefore the 'embourgeoisment' of the working class" (p. 155). He suggests that it is ironic that Marxist "rhetoric is used as an ideology to mobilise the rank and file whose life style and aspirations are intrinsically inclined towards the free market system as shown by the increasing demand for an equitable distribution of wealth" (p. 157). Thus, he dismisses the notion that the trade unions have successfully educated the black workers in the perception that apartheid and capitalism are 'hand in glove' and suggests that revolutionary rhetoric does not necessarily produce a commitment to the class struggle. In Marxist terms the conflict between capital and labour is perceived as inherent and inevitable and must ultimately resolve itself via confrontation. Ncube's conclusion that "trade unions divert and change conflict from a destructive pathology to a positive therapy" (p. 163) is clearly an endorsement of the 'Pluralistic Perspective' which holds that accommodation is possible.

STRUGGLE FOR CHANGE

Ncube's entry into the debate concerning the impact that black trade unionism will have upon the broader struggle for change in South Africa is timely. In a recent article, Martin Legassick has argued that there is a growing school of thought within the ranks of the ANC — which as a 'liberation' organisation has been committed to guerilla warfare and violence — that the mobilisation of the black working force might be more successful in establishing a workers' democracy.¹ (Which is not to say, as Chief Buthelezi does, that the newly-formed federation of trade unions, COSATU, is a front for the ANC). While Legassick holds the view that the dismantling of apartheid necessitates the overthrow of capitalism, apologists for the latter (but not necessarily the former) foresee a different role for the trade union movement. For instance, Bobby Godsell, Chairman of the Manpower Committee of the FCI, has stated that if collective bargaining failed, unions would be replaced by more truly revolutionary forms of organisation. He argued that "unions made poor vehicles for revolution, but that they could play a pre-revolutionary role in destabilising the current order and preparing the stage for radical change".² It would seem that the question being contended is not whether trade unionism will play a part in the struggle for change but what the nature of that role will or should be.

The past few years have seen the emergence of the trade union movement as arguably the most important focus of black mobilisation in South Africa. For, as Ncube points out, "as long as there are no sufficiently acceptable and

legitimate political structures to channel Black political aspirations and frustrations, Black trade unions could unavoidably and increasingly be used to express political feelings and/or pledge solidarity with Black community organisations" (p. 157). For the politically impotent black working classes the organisation of labour has provided an outlet for the manifestation of discontent with regard to socio-economic and political grievances. Trade unions have resisted government attempts to restrict their activities to negotiating pay and conditions at factory level and have involved themselves in campaigns (such as consumer boycotts) waged by community and political organisations. While certain trade unions have affiliated themselves to the UDF, they have not forfeited their autonomy for they see as their primary political role the building up of a strong, united, independent trade union movement.³ The formation of COSATU is in line with this strategy.

STRATEGY

Since the days of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), black trade unions have wrestled with the problem of what strategy to employ in attaining their goals (of which they themselves have not always been certain). They have equivocated between limiting their actions to the field of labour and assuming an overtly political posture. The ICU was an amorphous body of unskilled workers which relied on strength of numbers and organised as a mass movement. Unlike craft unions whose bargaining power lies in their monopoly of skills, the ICU could not flex sufficient economic muscle on the factory floor to win concessions on behalf of the workers. After a decade, the ICU collapsed with no tangible success despite it being representative of the largest labour movement in South African history. Friedman believes that the answer is for the unions to establish an organisational base in the factories by transforming mass mobilisation into an enduring power base.⁴ Since the partial implementation of the Wiehahn 'dispensation' the Government has accorded black trade unions a measure of recognition and industrial action is an area in which black workers have made apparent gains. Many strikes have seen participants win concessions and an increasing number of employers have reacted to this upsurge of worker militancy by seeking to accommodate the unions. It is the spectre of economic failure that haunts the trade union movement, for it is ultimately her economic muscle that determines her political bargaining power.

To return to the book under review, a weakness is evident in the writer's attempt to set the historical stage for the development of black trade unions in South Africa. His periodisation is confusing and rather tenuously and unconvincingly related to the theme. It appears as rather odd to the reviewer that Afrikaner nationalism is set in the context of British imperialism and yet its development is not traced through the period of increasing Afrikaner assetiveness, particularly in the economic field, which culminated in the political victory of 1948. The relevance of the Afrikaner's experience of capitalism and trade unionism in understanding his response to the emergent black unions and how this shaped labour relations after 1948 would seem to be obvious. Afrikaner nationalism was the midwife of apartheid, to that extent which it emphasised the preservation of a racial identity, and, hence, a factor which impinged on the development of black trade unionism.

Numerous errors of fact in the historical background sketch detract from the accuracy and reliability of this publication. For instance, the shootings in Port Elizabeth in October 1920 occurred as a result of the crowd's threat to use force to obtain the release of Masabalala from the Baakens Street Police Station and it had not "assembled to attend a mass meeting to be addressed by him and Kadalie" (p.31). Hertzog's Nationalist Party erroneously becomes "Socialist" in name and policy (pp. 34-5). Following Bonner⁵, the writer refers to the ICU's "elitist form of leadership" (p.47) and shows no acquaintance with Bradford's finding which questions the assumed petit-bourgeois background of its leaders⁶. In fact, Ncube's interpretation often relies on an uncritical appraisal of secondary sources — the research involved no primary source material.

The book also has little academic merit with regard to its style. Quotations are strung together rather tenuously by a text which does not develop its own synthesis. The 'scissors and paste' method which is used extensively is not a good advertisement for the launch of a new series by the publishers. In spite of the reviewer's reservations about this

publication, it would not be amiss to repeat the observation that it is easier to criticise than it would have been to write this book.□

References:

¹Legassick, M. 'Apartheid and the Struggle for Workers' Democracy', *Die Suid Afrikaan*, Winter 1985, no. 4 p. 24

²Cited in Cooper, C., et al, *Race Relations Survey 1984* (South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1985), p. 337

³Friedman, S. 'Emerging Unions', *Reality*, Vol. 15, no. 5, August 1983, p. 4

⁴Friedman, S. 'Political Implications of Industrial Unrest in South Africa', *Africa Perspective*, No. 18, 1981, p. 6

⁵Bonner, P. 'The decline and the fall of the ICU — a case of self-destruction', in E. Webster (ed), *Essays in Southern Labour History* (Johannesburg, 1978), p. 114

⁶Bradford, H. 'Mass movement and the Petty Bourgeoisie: the Social Origins of the ICU Leadership', *Journal of African History*, 25, 1984, pp 295-310 passim.

The English Academy of Southern Africa SILVER JUBILEE CONFERENCE

To mark its establishment in 1961, the English Academy is to hold a conference in September 1986. The theme of the conference is:

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY, 1961 TO 1986

The conference will be held over three days,
from 4th to 6th September, at the
Johannesburg College of Education

Lectures, workshops, seminars and discussion groups will survey the interrelationships between English and a wide range of factors — such as cultural, economic, political, linguistic and social — in this country over the past twenty-five years. Furthermore, discussions about English in the present and in a future South Africa will be led by writers, teachers, cultural workers, academics and others concerned with the relationships between language and society.

Full accommodation will be provided for those who require it, and details of the conference programme will be sent to Academy members and other interested people.

Members of the Academy, as well as all people who have an interest in English in South Africa are welcome to attend this conference. The conference programme will make provision for students and school children as well as for specialist groups, to explore matters of common interest.

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