

TWO LINES WITHIN THE TRADE UNIONS: A BRIEF REVIEW

More than 700 delegates from the COSATU and NACTU trade union federations, as well as from non-affiliated unions, met in Johannesburg in March this year to consider ways of countering the attack on the trade unions embodied in the Labour Relations Act (LRA) and from the employers. According to the communique issued at the end of the conference, 'delegate after delegate emphasized the need for united action against the backdrop of increasing state repression and attacks from employers'. The statement continued:

The summit transcended the differences existing between the various unions attending. While recognizing the different histories in the traditions and policies of the unions attending, the over-riding objective was always to emphasize the need for unity in action.

While delegates focussed on the immediate issues of state repression and the employers' offensive, the international political background to this conference was set by the turn of the Gorbachev regime in the USSR towards a settlement with capital over southern Africa, involving discussions behind closed doors between the African National Congress (ANC) and the great powers. (See the article 'Thieves in the Thieves' Kitchen' in this issue).

Since South Africa is governed in essence by a single capital located in the Oppenheimer empire, it is not surprising that the current process of political dialogue with the ANC (and therefore also, the South African Communist Party) was set in motion by this empire of capital, at least as far back as the Lusaka discussions of September 1985, and planned and prepared long before that. The relation of the working class to this international political process, and to the secret discussions of this empire of capital with the ANC/SACP, would be important under any circumstances. The question becomes all the more acute, given the leading place of the ANC and the SACP at the head of COSATU, the main trade union federation.

In this light, it is helpful to examine two documents relating to the South African trade union movement which were written in 1982, before the birth of COSATU. The first is from John Gaetsewe, general-secretary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), based in London. SACTU was at that time little more than an exile rump promoting the political ends of the ANC and the SACP, with slender influence in the trade unions within South Africa. Today the

ANC and the SACP, then at odds with the main current, have captured the leading position in the trade unions, while tendencies which played a far more important part during the rise of the unions have been eclipsed. This is the significance of the second document, from Joe Foster, then general secretary of the Cape-based Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which dissolved into COSATU. The standpoint of Foster and of FOSATU, then at the forefront of the struggle for unionization of the workers, has now largely been supplanted by that of SACTU and the SACP.

These documents, written in 1982, were replies to a discussion paper drawn up and circulated to a 'wide range of trade union bodies and individuals' by the International Department of the Labour Party in Britain, with a request for comments on the proposals that were outlined. (Labour Party, AF/1982/16). What is striking is the insistence by Gaetsewe in London, that all international contacts of workers' organizations in South Africa should be under the control of the ANC, through SACTU, as against the conviction of FOSATU (in the letter from Foster) that workers in South Africa required direct international worker contact through their unions, acting on their own behalf. Foster referred to a press release of October 1981 from FOSATU unions affiliated to the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF), in which these unions stated that they 'strongly favour fraternal contact between workers in South Africa and workers in other countries, at all levels, provided this is guided by the interests and requirements of the workers'.

Of these FOSATU unions in the metal industry, the strongest at that time was the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), which later merged with other unions to form the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). The current general secretary of NUMSA, Moses Mayekiso, a former organizer of MAWU, was acquitted of treason charges in April along with four co-accused, after a powerful international campaign in their defence centred mainly in the trade unions. Foster had been secretary of the Western Province Motor Assemblies Workers' Union (WPMWU). These and three other black motor and metalworkers' unions played an 'important part in the establishment of FOSATU' in April 1979 (Webster, p.187). Characterized by an extensive system of shop stewards, plant-based negotiating procedures and a policy of non-racial membership, FOSATU rested on democratic election of worker leaders in the factories: conditions which 'allowed worker leaders to wield power' within the unions (Friedman, p.253).

As against Gaetsewe's insistence that the interests of the workers be subordinated to that of the ANC, the stand of Foster, FOSATU and the metalworkers' unions was hostile to control by any nationa-

list political party. FOSATU's stand, oriented towards political independence and international unity of the workingclass, was the main political casualty of the period of upsurge of 1984-87. Though they did not and could not 'make the townships ungovernable', as their rhetoric proclaimed, the ANC and the SACP did make the main body of the trade unions governable by their own politics: a crucial factor for power-broking in any future deal with capital. The process by which organizational unification of the trade unions during 1984-87 became the vehicle for their subordination to nationalist and Stalinist politics is a matter still awaiting study and analysis. FOSATU's inability to maintain its standpoint of working class independence, in the face of a powerful nationalist current rooted mainly outside the unions, remains a crucial question for any future Marxist politics in South Africa.

DOCUMENTS

(These are reproduced as far as possible as in the original).

1. SACTU.

38, Graham Street,
London N1 8JX.

International Department, Labour Party,
Att. Jenny Little.

6. 8. 82

Dear Friend,

re: your document from the Africa Sub-Committee on SA Trade
Unions.

The following are some comments on the paper. They are in short note form to facilitate matters but we could of course elaborate if required.

Page 2. para. 1. There are trade unions such as CUSA and the Media Workers which exclude whites and are thus not non-racial. Nonetheless we feel they deserve support since they are anti-apartheid.

Page 2. para 5. The most important reason for supporting the trade unions in South Africa is because they constitute an arm of the struggle against apartheid. In as far as they cooperate with and work towards the goal of national liberation led by the African National Congress, they deserve support. The SA Congress of Trade Unions in particular deserves such support because of its clear stand for national liberation. It should be borne in mind that the question of National Industrial Trade Unions of mass organizations etc. need

support and need fostering in SA. This too has always been SACTU's policy.

Page 2. para. 6 There have been many other calls for support of the struggle other than by the ICFTU. WCL, WFTU, ICATU, OATU, and Yugoslav TUs but to name a few international centres, have been even more prominent than the ICFTU.

Page 2. para 7. Material assistance has often been selective. Especially so has been the "aid" of the AFL-CIO, but such selectivity is not absent from the actions of ICFTU or TUC. Such selectivity is divisive.

Page 2. para 8. and onto page 3 and follows

Such visits are not a secret from the SA authorities. Why have such visits been kept secret from the liberation movement? Why have they appeared to be parallel contacts much in the same mould as parallel trade unions in SA? This creates suspicion and disunity and is not constructive. There should be no exchanges with SA except where such exchanges further the struggle of the SA people for liberation led by the ANC and SACTU. This necessitates, as a minimum, seeking and following the advice of SACTU in the trade union field. The movement in Britain must recognize the feeling of the Africans in SA against visits to South Africa as witness the reaction of the people against the recent football tour.

Yours sincerely,

John Gaetsewe, General Secretary

2. FOSATU

2 Goodhope Street
Bellville South
7530 Cape

Mrs Jenny Little
International Secretary, The Labour Party
150 Walworth Road
London SE 17 1JT

20th October 1982

Dear Ms Little,

Your letter of the 7th October refers.

We find it difficult to comment directly on the paper itself. We can however for your information, and we hope that this will assist you in your debate, state our policy in regards to overseas contacts. The following are policy resolutions adopted at our Inaugural Congress in 1979.

1. Congress resolves that:

FOSATU's main concern is with workers and their interests in South Africa. FOSATU will, therefore, independently decide what is in its best interests without being influenced or dominated by foreign organizations or Governments.

In dealing with international organizations FOSATU will be guided by the interests of South African workers, its own aims and objects as stated in its Constitution and the activities of those international organizations.

2. This Congress resolves: that FOSATU should strive to establish and assist its affiliates in the establishment of international worker contact so as to create common rights and conditions of employment.

In particular our immediate aim will be to establish working relationships between workers, shop stewards and unions working and organizing in multinational companies, subsidiaries of which are being organized by FOSATU affiliates.

Such activities will have as their focus worker contact but will be carried out with all due respects for the procedures laid down by national trade union centres and International Trade Secretaries.

It would be seen that the Press Statement of the 22/10/81 is consistent with the aforementioned policy and FOSATU therefore fully endorses it.

Should you require any further information please feel free to contact the writer.

Yours faithfully,

Federation Of South African Trade Unions

J. Foster, General Secretary

3. Press Release By FOSATU Unions Affiliated To The International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), 22 October 1981

(This is the statement referred to by Foster in his letter to the Labour Party, as reproduced in the Labour Party's 'Advice Note' on 'Labour Movement Relations with South African Trade Unions', February 1983).

We strongly favour fraternal contact between workers in South Africa and workers in other countries, at all levels, provided this is guided by the interests and requirements of the workers. Visits to South Africa and visits overseas should involve not only top officials, but also plant-based worker representatives.

The aim of these visits should be to strengthen fraternal ties between organized workers in different countries and to carry forward

the struggle for workers in South Africa to win the same rights as have been won by workers in other countries.

Several visits to and from our unions have already taken place with shop stewards and union officials from Europe visiting unions and factories in South Africa and shop stewards and officials from our unions travelling to the USA and Europe. This contact has been valuable and will be encouraged in the future, provided it takes place in accordance with the above principles and guidelines.

Two other letters sent to the Labour Party in 1982 throw further light on the background to this defeat for the perspective of FOSATU. The president of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers in Britain, Terry Duffy, referred to 'tremendous pressure from the Communist Party in the U.K.' leading to cancellation of a visit to FOSATU unions in South Africa by members of the British section of the Metalworkers Federation. The general secretary of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation in Britain, Bill Sirs, wrote of 'disgraceful statements being made by the Communists and the extreme left' in Britain against the proposed visit by the British trade unionists, 'who were going for the specific purpose outlined in the FOSATU guidelines...'

This was the period when SACTU, the ANC and the SACP were fighting for political survival against the perspective of FOSATU within the trade unions. At the FOSATU congress in April 1982, Foster made a major statement (endorsed as policy by the union) calling for 'a working class political position' different from that of the ANC and the SACP — a 'political presence for worker organization' that would concentrate on the antagonism between labour and capital as the 'very essence of politics' in South Africa. It was directed specifically against 'those who ask of workers their political support without allowing them the right to build their own organizations...' (in MacShane, et al, pp.156,153,150)

The SACP replied with a furious counter-attack. It understood Foster's (and FOSATU's) presumption as directed against itself as a 'political party of the working class'. In an article by 'Toussaint', the SACP claimed exclusive prerogative to represent the working class politically:

Dare FOSATU ignore this? And dare it ignore the confusion and division it will sow in the ranks of the workingclass if it sets up a new 'wor-

kers' movement' in competition with or alongside the still living Communist Party?

And dare it ignore the disruptive and divisive effect its 'workers' movement' may have on the premier force in the country, the African National Congress...? (Toussaint, p.46).

Dare FOSATU! This catches the authentic tone of the Vishynskys of South African politics. SACTU rounded on FOSATU in its exile journal, *Workers Unity* (April 1982), with the charge: 'Direct Links Stink!' Gaetsewe's argument was repeated in 1987 in a statement from the SACTU coordinator for Western Europe, Zola Zembe, demanding that 'there should be no affiliation' to the Friends of Moses Mayekiso Campaign, based in London, which played a central part in coordinating the international campaign within the unions leading to the release of Mayekiso and his comrades. SACTU instructed the National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO) in Britain that the Congress Movement does not endorse any such sectarian groupings. In addition this group launched the Campaign without any prior or subsequent consultation with SACTU, ANC or AAM [Anti-Apartheid Movement].

NALGO in turn condemned the Friends of Moses Mayekiso Campaign, on the grounds that 'by its refusal to consult with the Congress Movement' the campaign had aligned itself 'against the principles and policies of the progressive democratic movement in South Africa of which COSATU is a key participant' (in NALGO *Action on Southern Africa Bulletin* No.4). It escaped the authors of this comment that NUMSA, which elected Mayekiso as general secretary after his arrest, was the second biggest union in COSATU.

The release of Mayekiso and his comrades, despite SACTU's obstruction, was an important victory for the kind of international workingclass campaign advocated by Foster. Within South Africa, however, the defeat of FOSATU's project, following the counter-offensive of the SACP and the ANC, provides a lesson in the inability of revolutionary politics to emerge directly from the unions themselves.

Without endorsing the politics of Duffy and Sirs, or the strategy of the FOSATU leadership, it is clear that the uncritical politics of the left in many countries (especially Britain) played a part during the mid-1980s in isolating the more independent and international outlook of the FOSATU unions. The collapse of FOSATU's standpoint as the leading element in the unions, under a tremendous onslaught by nationalist and Stalinist politics, is thus partly also the responsibility of the international left. The workers' movement in South Africa has been the victim of romantic and thoughtless enthusiasm in

the way it has been greeted internationally, as well as of its own political weaknesses. In this matter, as in others, time is long overdue to proceed towards a form of politics that is critical, sober and revolutionary.

Waged against the hostility of the SACP, the ANC, SACTU and the AAM, the international campaign among workers for support of Mayekiso has been a practical step in this direction.

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