

ORGANISED LABOUR IN EAST LONDON

The Setting

In East London, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) has recently organised black workers in order to improve their working and living conditions. The latter, for obvious reasons, involves the Ciskeian State. The African Food and Canning Workers and the General Workers Unions also have branches in East London. These three Unions work in close collaboration with each other. They share offices and have joint meetings. However, the most strongly represented union is the South African Allied Workers Union which claims to have a membership of over 15,000 workers employed in this area. *(total work force 32,000)*

It would appear that the activities of SAAWU are concentrated in the more technically advanced industries. Their membership, therefore, amongst others includes a nucleus of highly skilled workers, thereby considerably enhancing their potential bargaining position in these industries. However, workers in industries such as, for example, Wilson and Rowntree in which the average skilled levels are considerably lower, have also been organized by SAAWU. In companies such as the one mentioned above, which have up to date refused to recognize or negotiate with the union, the position is altogether different. The recent Wilson-Rowntree strike indicates the weakness of the union to protect its membership.

The African Food and Canning Workers and General Workers Unions while organizing the lesser skilled workers, have a relatively longer history of industrial strife and are firmly founded. In companies such as Langeberg, Meadow Seeds, Western Province Preserving and Epol, they have gained formal recognition as negotiating organisations.

In March 1979, SAAWU broke away from the black-consciousness affiliated Trade Union, the Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU) to form a non-racial union. Unlike BAWU, SAAWU believes that the future of South Africa lies in a non-racial participatory democracy. The policy of this union is non-racial based on workers unity. In Work in Progress (WIP) it is argued that the principle of non-racialism is important on at least one very meaningful ground; the area in which the struggle is perceived is the one most fundamental to the needs of workers. It is a class rather than racial struggle.

"We are not struggling against a particular race creed or religion. We are toiling against the exploiters and oppressors irrespective of the colour" says Sisa Njikolane, the East London branch chairman of SAAWU (WIP, No.17, 1981).

In accordance with the above-stated principles, SAAWU stresses the need for worker participation at all levels of union decision-making. In order to avoid the pitfalls of bureaucratic control, and to maintain worker representation, workers committees organised along industry lines have emerged with SAAWU merely operating as an umbrella body. It has been argued that if SAAWU is eliminated by government decree, the subsidiary unions can continue to operate. In the companies which recognise SAAWU or in which recognition is being negotiated, workers committees are being organised along these lines. These companies include South African Chloride, Johnson and Johnson, K.S.M. Milling. These have signed formal agreements with the Unions. In the pipe-line are Parker Pen, Nairn, Hoover, Buffalo Timber, Ark Garments and Nampak-Conical Containers. Considerable autonomy is given to these worker committees to make their own decisions.

For the progressive unions work-place and community issues are closely connected. This link is found to be politically threatening to many politicians and employers in South Africa. Mr.S.P.Botha, Minister of Manpower Utilisation, said: "Industrial peace is of the utmost importance to employers and employees as well as to the authorities. It should simply have to be ensured that Trade Union movements as such are not misused to create a situation of unrest, and eventual disorder, with the view of achieving aims which in reality have nothing to do with mutual labour relations, but are basically the persuance of foreign ideologies and an obvious attempt at overthrowing the established order". (Evening Post, 21.5.81). To this Thomazile Gqwetha, President of SAAWU has responded; "The accusation of a political role comes also because we do not confine our fight to the boundaries of the factory floor. I mean, how can we do that? We have to go and identify with the exploited and oppressed in their home situation. We have got to be there to see their actual experiences. That we have done and that is why our Union is such a rapid growing movement. The workers have been impressed with this down-to-earth policy".(Cape Herald).

Since 1964 thousands of Black workers have been relocated to Mdantsane. Although virtually part of East London, Mdantsane was

incorporated into the Ciskei in 1966. In 1979 it was estimated that 73% of the Black work-force in East London lived in Mdantsane. It is the policy of the South African State to eventually have the entire East London Black work-force living in this area. The policy of urban relocation performs an ideological function, for by having the workers live in an independent State it can be legally claimed that all their political activities must be confined to that State and that the only functions their unions should exercise must be restricted to working conditions and wages. However, the progressive Trade Union movement, and this includes the three organisations previously mentioned, condemn Ciskeian independence. It is against this background that a SAAWU official argues that "A ship of fools will never escape its revolutionary destiny - this is what the illegitimate son of Pretoria called Ciskei is driving people to. The leaders of Ciskei are political fanatics". (Evening Post, 7.11.81).

During her visit to the Eastern Cape last year Ms. Sheena Duncan of the Black Sash has described the workers in East London as 'the most politicized Black work-force in South Africa'.

Why the progressive Trade Unions in East London? Why the emphasis on the non-racial characteristics?

The roots of the Trade Union movement can be traced back to organisations such as the ICU, ANC and the BPC. The Industrial⁺Commercial Workers Union known as the ICU was a community based organisation formed in the early twenties. This organisation which had strong support throughout the country with a membership of approximately 80,000 included both rural and urban workers. It was strictly speaking a populist movement rather than a Trade union proper. Contemporary unionists have utilized this organisation as a model, profiting both from its successes and its failures.

In the 60's there was active support in this area for the ANC. In the 70's the Black Consciousness Movement with its headquarters in King-williamstown arose out of the ashes of the ANC. This movement fed into and provided ideological and organisational inputs for the nearby urban centres. However, the forms which the Black peoples struggles took in the seventies differ from those of the 80's. The BPC perceived the Black people's struggles in racial terms and with Unions in this area relatively weak, the class content of the struggle tended to be under-emphasized.

In the above paragraphs it was noted that SAAWU strongly emphasizes the non-racial character of their organisation. While the non-racial

principle has come to be incorporated into the constitution of a number of the independent unions, it is given priority by SAAWU. It was also the *raison d'etre* for breaking away from BAWU. It is probable that one of the factors contributing to the strong stance of the union on this issue is the close physical proximity of East London to the Ciskei. The Ciskeian State, as previously mentioned, is viewed as constituting a ruling class of Black oppressors. It is probably so that this has a direct influence in shaping the perceptions of Black workers, i.e. that Blacks can be just as oppressive as their White counterparts.

The vanguard of SAAWU form a core of ^{relatively} highly skilled workers. This leadership is made up of the younger generation, many of whom have completed their secondary school education. They are beginning to form a literate and sophisticated leadership group, who are able to negotiate and articulate demands - many of them were at school during the height of the schools unrest and this period experience contributed to their ideological perspectives.

Finally, a tremendous spur to action has been the ever increasing cost of living and the economists inability or unwillingness to control inflation (an ever increasing price especially of people's basic food-stuffs.). This spur to action is, of course, a country wide phenomenon.

Problems of organisation experienced; backlash against SAAWU.

Compared with the other industrial centers, East London is despite the existence of a number of multi-national firms, more labour intensive. This is evidenced by the fact that this city has experienced the highest rate of growth in employment over the past decade. From this it can be deduced that a large number of workers employed in this area are relatively unskilled. It is also estimated that unemployment in Mdantsane in 1980 was over 25% (figures by the I.S.E.R.). This is exacerbated by the huge rural slum in the hinterland of the Ciskei, from which people flood into the already overloaded and relatively underdeveloped area. As a result in a number of industries, workers are in a bargaining position of considerable weakness vis-a-vis their employers. Strikes have revealed that large numbers of workers can be easily replaced and re-trained over a relatively short period.

According to SAAWU Officials, management has in some of the plants used unemployment as a means of unfair coercion against SAAWU. Following work stoppages workers have been presented with a long list of unemployed. Management has threatened to replace them should they

not immediately return to work. (SATV).

It would also appear that scab labour has been organised by anti-union groups, as well as the recruiting agency of the Ciskei Manpower Development Center. These groups have been involved in disputes in a number of industries, for example, Wilson-Rowntree and more recently, Dunlop. In these companies, management has refused to recognise the Union or to negotiate with their respective Workers Committees. Instead, according to workers, there has been a tendency to dismiss organisers, who are considered to be 'agitators'.

It is in this context of wide-spread unemployment that SAAWU is engaged in the formation of an unemployed workers union. According to one of the officials, the primary aim of the union will be to retain the hundreds of recently fired workers within the Trade Union movement. He claims that "it is important for them to maintain their level of consciousness as workers". A second, but equally important, reason for organising unemployed workers is that they will not be prepared to take over the jobs of workers unfairly dismissed.

For reasons already outlined the goals of the progressive unions have come into conflict with those of the authorities. The function of control is exercised by both the Ciskeian State and the South African Government. During a strike at the Mdantsane Special Organisation (April 1979) SAAWU members were interrogated by the CCIS. A week later Mr. Gqweta was detained by the CCIS. Since a strike at the Wilson-Rowntree factory began in February 1981, 35 employees and former employees have been detained by the CCIS. In September 205 members of SAAWU, the AFCWU and GWU were detained on returning from a Union meeting. All the Unionists have since been released on bail of R50 each. The CCIS have said that the unionists will probably be charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act.

Time and again Major General Sebe has said that the Ciskeian Government rejects Ciskeian workers being members of Trade Unions for the simple reason that the Ciskeian Government looks after the workers. The Ciskeian Minister of Justice, Chief Njokweni has said in the Ciskei Legislative Assembly: "to assist in marketing our labour in South Africa, employees must ensure that desertions, walkouts, expulsions and insubordination are eliminated". At a SAAWU mass meeting, workers expressed concern about a plan being devised by the Ciskei Government to organise labour to meet what they conceive to be the needs of the South African market. The plan is known as the "Manpower Development Component". It entails a massive campaign to

market an "improved" Ciskeian labour force on the South African contract market. There will be a central government computer containing a record of every worker - including a disciplinary record. Workers who do not behave will not be given contracts and will be punished by their chiefs in the Ciskei who will undergo an orientation course to teach them to deal with "wrong-doers". (This is alleged by SAAWU).

Harassment has also, according to SAAWU officials, come from the South African State. In October 1980 S.P.Botha, the Minister of Manpower Utilisation, visited East London and called on employers to "hold out" against SAAWU until new legislation could be brought to assist them. Unionists maintain that employers in this area have been hiding behind this directive to avoid making the decision of whether or not to deal with an organisation that genuinely represents Workers interest.

On December 9th 1981, Msr.Gqweta and Njikalane were detained by the South African Security Police. In the past year they have been detained on five occasions. The full-time organiser of SAAWU, Mr.Eric Mtonga, was also detained during the same week. They are still being held in detention.

The lease on the Union offices expired in December 1981; it was not renewed. The Union at present occupies a hall at a de-proclaimed point in Duncan Village.

Over the past few weeks they have on several occasions been threatened with eviction. They have also been raided by the Branch a number of times.

Union officials argue that they must learn to adjust to what they regard as total onslaught on independent Unions. Again they realise that if they are to survive bannings, detentions and police harassment, they must as rapidly as possible consolidate on the shop floor, thereby lessening their reliance on a vulnerable leadership. This required the rapid defusion of organisational skills hence emphasis is shifting to the training of shop-stewards and other organisers. On the positive side - the industrial work-force in East London proper totals approximately 33,000. This is not a large number and relative to other areas easy to organize.

It has already been mentioned that SAAWU includes within its membership the more skilled workers. In East London there is a limited reservoir of skilled workers, thus giving the Union in some of the Industries considerable bargaining strength. For this very reason Dunlop Flooring during the strike in October 1981, found it extremely difficult to recruit substitute scab labour.

ALBANY BLACK SASH

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