

Point of View

Editorial

SOUTH AFRICA'S BLACK UNIONS: A NEW FACTOR IN THE ANTI-APARTHEID EQUATION

The National Democratic Convention will soon meet in the city of San Francisco. Although former Senator Walter Mondale seems to be practically assured of the nomination, anything could happen.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who has trailed Senator Hart and former Vice-President Mondale from the start, has fought a good fight. He has made known, in no uncertain terms, the concerns of the poor, minorities, and women. He has let it be known that he could muster delegates, and assuredly will have his name placed in nomination from the floor as a candidate for President of the United States.

Rev. Jackson has several bargaining points to his credit. He may release those delegates pledged to him to either of the other contenders, or he could hold the delegates as bargaining power for a platform pleasing to him and to his followers. He may even hold the delegates as bargaining power for the Vice-President spot.

Whatever he chooses to do, we can all be proud that a Black man had the financial backing, the intelligence, and the intestinal fortitude to run for the office of President of the United States.

By Norman Hill

While U.S. experts continue to focus on the traditional adversaries in the South African conflict (the Afrikaner-dominated government and the underground African National Congress), a new and increasingly significant factor — a black-led trade union movement — has emerged in the South African equation.

The Reagan Administration and the political right remain hopelessly wedded to a policy of encouraging "reform" through "constructive engagement." In the meanwhile the South

African government (with Administration encouragement) is revising political rights in that country in a way which seeks to strengthen its authority and to perfect apartheid.

Liberals and the left continue to focus almost exclusively on an accommodation with the African National Congress, which is committed to a policy of armed struggle as the solution to the South African dilemma. And while there can be no denying the ANC its place in any eventual solution, attempts to portray that movement as the only anti-apartheid show in town are inaccurate and misguided.

Indeed, even a brief visit to South Africa reinforces the impression that an emerging black-led union movement is becoming an increasingly powerful actor on the local scene. The South African press is filled daily with accounts of local work stoppages, strikes, and union-led protest marches. Johannesburg's walls are filled with strikers urging South Africans to "Boycott Racist Liberty Life," a company which refuses to recognize a black trade union. This impression of activity is reinforced by statistics.

In the last year alone, almost unnoticed by the U.S. press, the two major black-led labor federations, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) have scored dramatic membership gains. CUSA's membership has nearly doubled from 88,000 in late 1982 to a year-end 1983 total of nearly 170,000. CUSA's growth has been spurred by the impressive success of its mineworkers affiliate. Under the lead-

ership of a youthful, articulate, and charismatic leader, Cyril Ramaphosa, the strategically important National Union of Mineworkers has organized some 55,000 workers and become the first black union to be formally recognized by the South African Chamber of Mines. The union has won a commitment from the Chamber on the elimination of race discrimination work practices.

Equally impressive have been the gains scored by FOSATU, which has grown from 100,000 members in 1982 to some 150,000 in late 1983. Recent months also have seen growth in the membership of other independent black unions. That these gains have occurred at a time in which South Africa is in the throes of a recession emphasizes the black union movement's remarkable achievement.

Yet impressive as these gains are, black union membership today accounts for less than ten percent of the black workforce. Moreover, although talks between the black-led unions are in progress, trade union unity has proved an elusive goal.

Trade union organizers also are hampered by state harassment in the form of detentions, imprisonment, and "banning orders." And Prime Minister P.W. Botha has ominously indicated that while he recognizes the right of workers to organize and deliberate on working conditions, if the trade unions allow themselves to be exploited by outside political forces, the "ordinary measures of orderly government will

be applied."

To date the trade unions have deliberately maintained a low political profile. Yet it is clear that the unions constitute the only democratically based mass institution in which black participate in South Africa. Moreover, the trade unions are an important training and proving ground for future South African leaders.

It is equally clear that in a society in which black workers are denied normal outlets for political expression, the trade unions may not avoid being the repositories of political activity. After all, the quality of life and the standard of living of black workers is directly related to the politically-determined structures of apartheid.

The parallels with Poland's Solidarity movement are apparent. As is the possibility of a crackdown. Yet as one trade union leader told me, "The difference between South Africa and Poland is that we don't have 30 Soviet divisions on our borders."

What the future holds for South Africa is impossible to predict. Yet if that country is to move not only toward the elimination of apartheid but toward democratic rule, it must have a strong and vibrant independent trade union movement, which in country after country is an important guarantor of pluralism, due process, and human rights.

It's high time that liberals and conservatives in the foreign policy establishment joined with the U.S. labor movement in recognizing the significance of South Africa's growing black union movement.

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