

MAJOR PROBLEMS IN UNION FORMATION

IN RHODESIA IN THE 70'S

by Phineas Sithole

The main objective of labour policy in Rhodesia is the maintenance of industrial peace under a system of cheap labour. This was made clear by the Minister of Labour in 1959 in introducing the Bill which amended the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934 and 1945, when he said that:

'It could be argued that to provide for these associations is nothing more than a *control measure* and let me be perfectly frank, it is.'

Control of unions was necessary for control over wages. Since 1959 more and more control has been added in amending the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1964, 1967, 1971, and 1973. In the process the final settlement of disputes between employers and employees has been transferred increasingly to the State through the use of Industrial Tribunals or through State proclamations by the President over the legal sanctioning of strike action.

CONSTRAINTS ON UNIONIZATION

Legal representations by trade unions have been limited to participation in Industrial Boards or Industrial Councils. For those industries which do not have unions, which in the Ministers' opinion fully represent employees or which do not have unions at all, wage agreements are negotiated through an Industrial Board. The board is composed of government appointees and operates at his discretion and only in an advisory capacity. Unions have no representation. Appeals via this channel do not meet the expectations of union members who, if they are to justify their association with the union expect to be represented through an Industrial Council. Industrial Councils can only be formed by organised parties. Unions therefore cannot attempt to provide

protection to their members until an Industrial Council meeting can be arranged. This process can take a long time. Even then the system of control has been strengthened through amendments to industrial conciliation procedures, the use of lengthy arbitration procedures, and the effective prohibition of legal strikes. Furthermore agreements of the Council must be submitted for the approval of the Minister who, under the 1973 Amendment to the Act, has the power to amend the terms of the agreement where he considers them to be contrary to the interests of 'consumers' and the 'public as a whole'.

Trade unions therefore exist at the discretion and volition of employers and the state. The whole industrial conciliation system is designed to discourage the growth of strong black unions. State labour policy pays lip service to the existence and growth of black trade unions in order to maintain industrial peace. The main thrust of Rhodesian labour policy remains the creation of a supply of cheap black labour. This policy is pursued through various means one of which has been inaugurated by the Apprenticeship Training and Skilled Manpower Development Authority which limits the entrance of blacks into the skilled trades. Black trade unions have thus been effectively restricted to represent labourers and semi-skilled operators only.

THE NEED FOR SELF-RELIANCE

With very few exceptions the black labour movement has not established itself with regard to services to the community, concerning industry and the workers in general. This weakness is illustrated by the lack of provision for welfare services to union members. The development of these activities through *self-reliance* and cooperation can only strengthen the unions and help democratize union structures by involving the membership more actively. It will also help attract non-members to the union.

The black labour movement has not been consulted

directly or indirectly in the formulation of national socio-economic and labour policies. This consultation has been considered unnecessary since black workers are thought to be temporary workers in urban areas and marginal to the political system. In practice, many workers have been made dependent on the labour reserves of the Tribal Trust Lands. This has only been because of low wages. Methods of direct action have not been developed fully. As a result members do not enjoy the full benefit of union protection and the improvement of wages.

Protection of members' interests will not be generally felt until trade unions can also ensure that benefits to cover sickness, unemployment and old age are provided. In certain industries sickness and pension benefits are provided for the employees by the State. These have been achieved as a result of trade union or worker activity and pressure.

Attempts have also been made by trade unions to provide individual services to members in the form of advice and support in the case of personal conflict in the work situation. This service has been difficult to develop. Management have strongly resented union involvement in shop-floor disputes.

The trade unions have to some extent developed in a perverse direction. The internal function towards members has been neglected and the external function with regard to national issues concerning the ICFTU, employers associations and government have taken prominence. The workers in general have received too little attention.

WORKERS ASPIRATION AND UNION ACTION

The differences between the aspirations and needs of members and the function of trade unions helps to explain why trade unions have partly failed to create greater participation by members, resulting in serious apathy which has sapped the strength of the black labour movement.

The above description is an oversimplification of

the complex tendencies and trends that have been manifested in actual form between black workers at different levels in the economic structure. No study has yet been made on the area of work organisation on the shop floor where the individualisation of the needs of the workers manifest themselves and which present a new scope and opportunity for trade union development. If the Industrial Conciliation Act could be amended to permit trade union representation at the shop floor level.

The extent to which the trade unions will be able to recognise these needs, and the way in which they will be able to relate themselves to them, will determine the relationship between the trade union and its members, and thereby, establish the new overall function of the trade union organisation rooted more directly in worker needs.

This discrepancy between the needs of the workers and their perception of the existing role of the trade union, has led to organisational apathy. This has expressed itself in low attendance at union meetings, low membership, high turnover of members, lack of direction, lack of effective communication, and often wild and uncoordinated strike action.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE OF BUREACRACY AND WORKER ALIENATION

The underdeveloped trade unions have developed a complex organisational structure with centralisation of power and growing internal differentiation, thereby making it increasingly difficult for the individual worker to perceive participation as meaningful. There is need to remedy this divorce between members and unions.

The overall result has been the developement of the following characteristics:

*Increasing international orientation and complex bureaucratization with a centralization of administration, which has meant that needs have been left unsatisfied.

*Left unsatisfied workers have developed apathy towards the trade union.

*Further centralisation in decision making and in the leadership system has followed.

*Further reduction in the prospect of participation ensues, giving rise to even less satisfaction of the needs of members so that even further apathy of members results.

Whether the trade union can maintain its character as a *democratic* organisation will be determined by the extent to which trade union leadership is able *and prepared* to break this vicious cycle. This means that the trade union has to enlarge in an *appropriate* way, especially its internal function with regard to its own members, in addition to the contemporary roles it performs.

Industrial Relations in Rhodesia involving black labour have been recognised at two different levels though trade unions themselves have not developed enough to take full advantage of these opportunities and facilities for promoting their development.

*At the national level where trade unions can participate with the government and employer organisations in long term planning and development.

*At the Industrial Council Level and company level where the management and the union get involved in direct negotiations concerning conditions of employment and increases in wages.

AID AND UNION DEMOCRACY

The Rhodesian Labour movement has been divided into a number of segments, with titular black trade union leaders, some dependent on the ICFTU, to lead them. This type of structure has been imposed to conform with the structural development taking place elsewhere, e.g. in the British Labour movement. What is forgotten (by the ICFTU for example) is that amalgamations and the combin-

ation between trade unions in the United Kingdom have taken over a hundred years to mature.

The formal black labour movement is less than 30 years old and has not attracted into its ranks the mass of black workers. How can the present structural impositions of the ICFTU bring about pressure for change in industry when the lofty structure it preposes inevitably widens the gap of communication between the top leaders and the individual member? Employers and the Government cannot seriously consider demands made by leaders when it is obvious from any external examination that some trade unions do not enjoy the active support of the majority of workers. This can only weaken the African labour movement as a whole.

The black worker is being programmed to accept international ideological concepts of trade unions (antinomous to his requirements) and is thus being denied the opportunity to bring about necessary structural changes through organised collective direct action. A trade union devoid of active membership is practically a 'talk shop' because the leaders, isolated from members, cannot enter into any active negotiations or strikes. It is clear that the black labour movement is risking gaining international ideological purity at the expense of developing trade union power and democracy and the development of structures which in the contemporary situation can only be brought about through collective action and organised strikes.

Phineas Sitole
President
African Trade Union
Congress.