THE GARMENT WORKERS
by RAY ADLER

The mass production of ready-to-wear clothing in factories is a comparatively recent development in South Africa. A generation ago the term “clothing worker” brought to mind a tailor or dressmaker, making clothes to measure, or else a seamstress doing outwork at home, “in poverty, hunger and dirt.”

Many of the tailors and dressmakers had come to South Africa from Eastern Europe during the wave of emigration of the twenties. They brought with them a militant trade union tradition, which laid the foundation of the Garment Workers' Union. Unlike the earlier generation of immigrant craftsmen, mainly from Britain, who established craft unions in the engineering, building and other trades, they did not suffer from a narrow craft outlook. It is to their credit that when big clothing factories began to open in the late twenties, starting a huge expansion that has led to the garment industry becoming one of the biggest in the country in a very short number of years, the tailors reached out a helping hand to organise these hundreds of newcomers to the industry.

The newcomers were girls from the farms, part of the great influx to the towns which took place in the depression years, with no experience of organisation or disciplined factory life. But they proved themselves to be splendid fighters in the trade union movement. We garment workers are proud of the determined fights we carried out in the early years of our union, in which we transformed our conditions and wages from the worst in the country to rank among the best of any secondary industry. In the fights and struggles of those days the young Afrikaans girls fresh from the platteland stood together like seasoned trade unionists; they got up early in the mornings to take their places on the picket line, and fought courageously in the streets against the police who were trying to smash strikes by force.

With this militant spirit and tradition, and a progressive spirit far removed from the conservative timidity of the older unions, the Garment Workers' Union could have become an inspiring example of democratic industrial organisation, and a fine example to all the young unions which have sprung up here during the huge expansion of secondary industry of recent years. Unfortunately it did not do so, and the blame must be laid very largely at the door of Mr. "Solly" Sachs, who was for many years our Union secretary. "Solly" has since been victimised by the Government and forced to get out of the organisation, and it would perhaps seem more gracious and fitting to remember only the merits of his energetic and capable leadership, and to forget the many bitter and unpleasant disputes which I and others had with him in the past. However he has now written a book which claims to be a history of the union (in fact the book is mainly about himself) from which it is clear that he has learnt nothing from the bitter defeats and humiliations which the trade union movement has suffered at the hands of the Nationalists. Yet we must learn those lessons, and act upon them, if the movement is to survive at all. The history of our union is very rich in such lessons.
The root idea of a trade union is that it should unite all workers in an industry, whatever their race, colour, sex or creed. All should be entitled to become members, and all members must enjoy equal rights in the union.

During the height of prosperity in the garment industry, thousands of Non-Europeans joined the trade. At first in the Transvaal there were only a few Coloured workers employed, mainly in the hard and poorly-paid jobs of pressers, but as time went on hundreds and then thousands of Coloured and Africans became qualified as machinists and became highly skilled and efficient workers. With the ending of the general depression in the country, the flow of White women ready to undertake factory work dried up — the employers had no alternative but to turn to Non-White labour. Today, a substantial majority of garment workers are Non-Europeans.

These Non-European garment workers have become the backbone of the industry and the most loyal and class-conscious members of our Union. They played a splendid part in the fights for improved wages and conditions. But they were denied any say in the central leadership of the Union or on the Industrial Council where their wages and conditions were negotiated.

From the start Mr. Sachs set his face against a policy of democracy and equality in the Union with regard to these workers. He himself, he always claimed, was a very progressive and revolutionary person, with no colour prejudice. The argument always was that “the Afrikaans girls would not sit down at meetings with the Non-Europeans, and it would split the Union.” Hence the Union began those apartheid practices which have undermined and corrupted it, long before the ugly word was heard of and before the present Government came into power.

The Coloured workers were segregated into a “Number Two” Branch, with separate, and inferior, offices and with no representation on the Central Executive Committee. When officials of this “second-class” branch, reflecting the demands of their members, demanded democratic representation they were threatened with immediate dismissal. To this very day, although now a majority, they have not won representation on the Central Executive Committee, or on the Industrial Council. The principles of the new Industrial Conciliation Act — apartheid and white domination — were unfortunately practiced for many years by our Union.

Despite such treatment, it was the Non-European workers who time and again have proved their worth. When the Blankewerkersbeschermingsbond, under the leadership of men like Schoeman and de Klerk, both now in the Nationalist Cabinet, began making inroads into the Union (helped, it must be said, by the appeasement and apartheid policy of the Union leadership) the Coloured and African workers were their most determined opponents. Had it not been for the support of the Non-European workers, the present European leadership would long ago have been replaced by Charl Mayer and other Bond representatives. When the famous protest demonstration was held on the City Hall steps, against the banning of Mr. Sachs, the Non-European girls turned out in full force, and it was they who met the full brunt of the police charge and had their heads split open, many being taken to hospital.
Little recognition of this valiant part is given by Mr. Sachs in his book. The "Rebel Daughters" of his title all turn out to be Europeans (the little autobiographies of Union leaders are in fact the best part of the volume) and such devoted followers of the author as Hetty du Preez and Lucy Mvubelo are not even mentioned.

Since Mr. Sachs' departure his protégées in the Union leadership have continued on the fatal path of appeasement to racialism which he taught them. To our shame, the leaders of our Union played a leading role in dissolving the former Trades and Labour Council, and replacing it with the Trade Union Council which excludes African workers. The excuse for destroying the T. & L.C. was that it would help to bring about unity in the struggle against the new I.C. Act — then a draft Bill. But the T.U.C. has never fought the I.C. Act effectively, or even tried to do so.

Instead, even before the new Act was passed, the G.W.U. leaders, with indecent haste, became the first to accept the principle of separate Unions for European and Non-European workers. As Mr. Kotane correctly pointed out at the time ("New Age: May 3, 1956"): "It is an illusion that you can overcome the menace of apartheid to the workers' movement by surrendering to the principles of apartheid."

These weak-kneed policies of opportunism and retreat have naturally had the effect of weakening the Union. The result is plain to be seen in the place where, to the worker, it counts most — in the pay-packet. For the first time in many years, the new agreement recently signed by our Union leaders accepts a substantial cut in wages — this at a time when prices are going higher and higher.

Instead of the wages being £6.14s. a week for experienced machinists it has been cut down to £5.3s. It is true that those already in the industry are supposed to have their former wage-levels protected, and it is only the newcomers (the so-called "B" Group employees) who will get the new lower wages. But anyone who is not blind could have seen what would happen — it is already happening — top-wage workers are being replaced, and hundreds of workers have been compelled to sign applications to the Industrial Council asking for exemptions from their correct wages. I have seen scores of garment workers myself queueing up at the Labour Department for unemployment benefits.

That is the position in the garment industry after all these years of apartheid and appeasement policy started by Solly Sachs and continued by the present leaders of the union. Similar policies in most of the rest of the trade union movement have reduced the organised workers of South Africa to a position in which they have unfortunately proved unable to resist the Fascist attacks of the Nationalist Party.

So long as workers' leaders remain obsessed with complying with legal formalities in order to maintain their registration the position will get worse and worse: only the employers and the Nationalists will benefit. The only solution is to embrace all sections — including the Africans, who are proving the most determined progressive force in the country — in united and democratic trade union organisations.

A real history of the garment workers' union — which means more than just a one-sided expression of the cult of an individual — would prove the correctness of this solution to the hilt. Such a history has yet to be written.