

Black Trade Unions in South Africa: A Potent Force for Change

by Norman Hill

Growing reports of escalating unrest in South Africa often give Americans a somewhat distorted view of that troubled land. Persistent media accounts of bloodshed and brutality, while accurate, create the false impression that, for the nation's 32.6 million blacks, violence has become a final desperate means of instigating social change. But while mounting frustration with the Botha regime's staunch refusal to take any serious steps toward dismantling the reprehensible apartheid system has forced many to abandon all hope for a non-violent, democratic solution to the country's problems, there are many others who, despite daunting odds, are pursuing peaceful avenues of change.

What few Americans may realize is that there are hundreds of anti-apartheid groups in South Africa that are still committed to bringing about a democratic South Africa by peaceful means. These include civil and human rights groups, educators, women's groups, humanitarian agencies, church groups, and black and non-racial trade unions.

Of all these groups, the most powerful and politically significant are the burgeoning black and non-racial trade unions. Since 1979, the year they were legalized, the mainly black unions have cautiously built up their strength, especially in such key areas as mining, engineering, and car manufacturing, and now embrace about 16-18 percent of the active black and brown workforce.

During the early years of their existence, the unions confined themselves mainly to improving wages and working conditions, largely because they are barred by law from engaging in activities deemed political. Eventually, however, union leaders and members understood that they could no longer limit themselves to purely job-related issues. The black worker in South Africa continued to be subjected to the daily humiliations of apartheid outside the workplace, which affected his dignity, his family, and his people. To negotiate with dignity with an employer about working conditions became incompatible with worker participation in a political system that had a place for his citizenship.

Since the imposition of the state of emergency in July 1985, the unions have sought to broaden their political agenda and to unify the trade union movement. The Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), which includes an estimated 170,000 workers from several unions, has sought to cement relations with "black-consciousness" unions and other independent organizations. Last December, a significant step toward trade union unity was made with

the establishment of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a federation of some 36 unions representing a total of 500,000 workers. The new federation, which cuts across tribal and cultural lines, includes member unions from food, transportation, retailing and mining industries, including the 230,000-member strong National Union of Mineworkers. Mining accounts for half of South Africa's export earnings. With such economic leverage, any COSATU strike could severely hurt the South African economy.

The growing strength of a democratic, politicized and unified trade union movement poses a serious challenge to the Botha regime. In a society which lacks the ordinary means by which individuals seek human rights and political participation, the trade unions appear to be the only vehicles available for organized political activity.

Clearly, South Africa's black and non-racial unions represent a potentially decisive factor in South Africa's transformation toward democracy and the eradication of apartheid. They are also unquestionably a critical bulwark against anti-democratic and potentially anarchic forces in the country. Well organized, egalitarian and democratic, they are a critical component of a post-apartheid South Africa.

On March 22, the AFL-CIO in cooperation with the A. Philip Randolph Institute, is sponsoring a Day of Solidarity with South African Trade Unions in seven U.S. cities: New York,

Washington, Detroit, St. Louis, Houston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The rallies are being organized to demonstrate the American labor movement's support of the black and non-racial unions in South Africa. They will provide an important opportunity for trade unionists in this country to assert their solidarity with their brothers and sisters in South Africa in their struggle for social and economic justice and an end to apartheid.

Organized labor in America has been at the forefront of providing educational and technical assistance to black and non-racial trade unions in South Africa. But while international demonstrations of support are welcome, it must be remembered that the struggle to

achieve justice and democracy in South Africa ultimately depends on the action of the South African people, black and white. The black trade union movement in South Africa still faces formidable obstacles, and attempts to organize a larger percentage of the black workforce continue to be impeded by government harassment of union leaders. But the growing sense of common purpose and unity, coupled with an expanded agenda that includes critical social and political concerns, make the black and non-racial trade union movement a powerful force for change in South Africa.

Norman Hill is President of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

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New Beginnings

Masonic Prince Hall and Church Affiliated Families join together to present "New Beginnings 'Ecumenical' Preacher — Rama", Saturday, March 22, 1986, 7:00 p.m., New Hope Baptist Church, Reverend Johnny Pack, IV, Portland, OR 97227. The community is invited to share an evening of song and community involvement to support local scholarship organizations for the youth of our community.

This community endeavor will provide educational scholarships for the youth of our community. We have chosen to support the following established educational scholarship organizations acceptable to the Division of Higher Education: Mt. Sinai Church of God in Christ Scholarship; A.A. Newton Scholarship; Phil Reynolds Memorial Scholarship and Oregon Grand Chapter, O.E.S., PHA Scholarship.

The Masonic Prince Hall and Church Affiliated Families are pleased to present: The Martin Luther King 100 Voice Choir; Laborers, Mt. Sinai Church of God in Christ; Paradise Baptist Church, Reverend R.C. Hill; and Everlasting Baptist Church, Reverend Willie F. Pride will be among the voices to be heard. Many of our Civic and Community leaders have consented to join with us for our "New Beginnings 'Ecumenical' Preacher-Rama".

The proceeds will go to our own Community Scholarship Programs. Make your check payable to "New Beginnings", c/o 2719 N.E. 7th Avenue, Portland, OR 97212.

Gladys Young, Phyllis Smith, Co-Chairpersons, 282-6340/281-1237.

Seminar on Newborn Care

Prepared Childbirth Association of Portland will sponsor a one-night seminar on newborn care for expectant parents on Thursday, March 27, from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. Class will be held at Emanuel Hospital, 2801 N. Gantenbein, in Room 1077.

Subjects to be discussed include selecting practical clothing and equipment on a budget, choosing a baby doctor, infant behavior, and parent survival techniques.

Instructor is Glenda Peterson, R.N., a former public health nurse who has taught for Prepared Childbirth Association since 1979.

Cost of the class is \$5.00 per family. To register, call 245-3196.

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