

# THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

## Trade Union Development in South Africa

By James Shields (Johannesburg).

During the past two or three years there have been some big changes taking place with regard to the Trade Union movement in South Africa. In one or two journals dealing with Trade Union Unity recently, certain figures have been quoted with regard to the strength of S. A. Trade Unions. These figures it must be pointed out here only referred to what are known as the white Trade Unions, and did not include the big section of natives now organised in Trade Union ranks. This is a very important factor to be reckoned with as far as South Africa is concerned, because the present period is with

messing a rapid decline in the membership of the white unions whilst the native Trade Union is making remarkable strides forward.

The hey-day of Trade Unionism was reached in this country in the year 1920 to 1921, when the numerical strength of the movement stood at the figure of 86,000. With the collapse of the 1922 strike on the Rand however, and the resulting chaos in the Trade Unions circles, this figure has dropped to a very low level. The rapidity of the decline and also its extent can be well judged when it is realised that the Engineering Union (A. E. U.), which formerly had a membership of over 11,000 now stands at the very low total of barely 3,000. The situation in the South African Mine Workers' Union has been even worse, where a drop in membership has taken place of roughly about 10,000. This Union, of course, was practically knocked out of existence during the Rand revolt. Before the revolt in question, however, there were round about 12,000 miners in its ranks, and yet to-day, three years after the finish of the strike, out of 18,000 white miners in the Transvaal barely 1,000 are within the ranks of the Union.

How the Unions as a whole have deteriorated can best be understood when it is realised that their aggregate membership is now between 35,000 and 40,000. Truly there has been a tremendous drop indeed from 86,000 in 1921 to hardly 40,000 in 1925. This phenomenon might seem incredible when taken in conjunction with the growth and development of South African industry where a rather big increase in the number of industrial establishments has taken place. Since 1920 over two hundred new establishments have come into existence whilst to go even further back we find that in 1916 there were roughly 4000 factories as compared with the present number of over 7000.

It is significant to note also that practically no increase in the white population has taken place during those years, whilst it can be definitely stated that more skilled workers left the country during that period than came into it. Where then, one might ask, were the fresh workers for the extra 3000 factories procured from. It is here that we at once realise that the new industrial workers have been procured from amongst the natives. Coming into contact with the evils of capitalist industrial life and seeing the white Trade Unions built up by the white workers, it was only natural that the idea of organising should take hold among the natives. Round about the end of the war we had a definite start being made in this direction and what is known as the I. C. U. (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union), was inaugurated. This Union which follows the line of the one big Union type came into being at the beginning of 1919 with the organising of the Dock workers in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, in its ranks. At the commencement of its career it was engaged in strike action on behalf of its members and to a big extent was fairly successful in raising their wage level. As a consequence of this success the employer commenced substituting coloured workers (asiatics) in the docks in place of natives, and the Union then began turning its attention to recruiting commercial workers, domestic workers, etc.

No doubt its initial racial outlook in character prompted it to move in this direction. More and more, however, as time went on the native in industry was drawn into its ranks, until to-day quite a fair proportion of its membership is made up of industrial workers.

The exact details of the I. C. U. are briefly:

Membership on the Book of over 30,000.

Regular monthly paying members of 15,000.

Female workers in the Union — One third of the total.

Two fifths of the total membership are industrial workers.

Remainder — Agricultural and Women.

The contribution per member is sixpence per week, but women and agricultural workers only pay half that amount or threepence per week.

The headquarters of the Union will probably be shifted from Cape Town to Johannesburg (the industrial centre of the country) in order to assist more in the work of organising the mine natives who number over 200,000 in the Transvaal.

At the present time we have a situation existing wherein Trade Unionism so far as the whites are concerned is rapidly declining, whilst Trade Unionism among the natives is rapidly increasing. The membership of the Trade Unions apart from the I. C. U., as stated before, is less than 40,000 as compared with the I. C. U. membership alone of over 30,000.

There is this to be said about the I. C. U., however, and that is that to a very big extent it still has to approach to proper

Trade Union lines. As yet it seems to be still greatly imbued with the spirit of racialism, and its ranks are open to non-working class elements, even a native bishop being included in them. Two tendencies make themselves felt within it, one which says "Let us secure national independence first and then we shall get our freedom", and the other which says, "Freedom first and national independence will come afterwards".

Between the native and the white worker there is a bitter racial hatred, which becomes in certain parts of the country more intense as the cheap-paid native displaces the white worker from industry.

In the Cape Province (formerly known as Cape Colony), where a large section of the workers are coloured, this feeling has to a big extent been overcome. Here one finds the Trade Unions admitting natives and coloured workers into their ranks as a consequence of the sheer driving force of economic necessity. In the Transvaal and Natal the exact opposite is the case, the aristocratic white worker standing aloof and refusing the native admittance. In this part of the country of course, there is no great section of coloured workers as in the Cape Province. The coloured worker in the Cape Province, owing to various reasons, acts more or less as a factor which helps to bridge the gulf between white and black. In Cape Town docks however, due to the work put in by the I. C. U. we find native and coloured on an equal footing and both very little below the level of the white. Wage rates for dock workers run as follows:

White workers 6/6d per day.

Native and Coloured workers from 4/6d to 5/- per day.

Just about a year ago an attempt was made to link the various unions close together. For this purpose what is termed the S. A. A. E. O. (South African Association of Employees' Organisation) was brought into existence to link them up on lines similar to the British Trade Union Congress. The General Council of this body has been making pretty good headway so far, and at the moment has an affiliated membership of approximately 15,000. It has left the question of including native unions in its ranks open at the moment, but there is every likelihood that before long it will probably take these inside also. There is one other body which links the Trade Unions up (now affiliated to the S. A. A. E. O.), but only on a local scale. This is called the Cape Federation of Trade Unions, and comprises a membership of about 4,000. The S. A. A. E. O. is affiliated to the International Federation of Trade Unions and had a delegate representing them at the last Geneva Conference of the body.

With regard to the breaking down of the colour bar in the Transvaal, the thin end of the wedge has been inserted into two Unions, viz. the Furniture Workers Industrial Union, and the Witwatersrand Tailors Association, by the inclusion of a few coloured workers. This latter body, by the way, is made up of small merchant-tailors and wage workers, and it states that the present number of coloured workers (seven Malays) now within its ranks must not be exceeded. This development, however, forecasts what is likely to happen in the future.

The great need of the moment is the active propagation in the different unions, by the class conscious elements, of the necessity for unity between black and white workers, and turning of those workers' attention into class channels instead of along lines of racial hatred.

More and more as the economic factors make themselves felt will the realisation be borne in upon the white worker that the native must be organised in the Trade Unions so as to prevent the boss class playing one section off against the other. Only when the need for this is thoroughly grasped will a class outlook be pushed to the fore, and proper working class Trade Union organisation come into existence in South Africa embracing the unity of all toilers on the industrial field.

## FOR THE UNITY OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

### The Movement for Unity is Growing.

By A. Lozovsky.

Along with the intensification of the economic crisis there is growing up among the masses the will to unity. This will to unity is breaking through all reformist barriers and bears witness to the fact that the Communist International, the Red Inter-